

**REFINING NATURE** THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE OF PETER WALKER



SECOND AND UPDATED EDITION

**REFINING NATURE**  
**THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**  
**OF PETER WALKER**

SCOTT MELBOURNE

BIRKHÄUSER BASEL

GRAPHIC DESIGN, LAYOUT AND TYPESETTING: Vera Pechel

COPY EDITING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT: Ria Stein

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# FOREWORD

NIAL KIRKWOOD

This publication demonstrates the richness and breadth of the current landscape design field as well as introducing and portraying one of its finest design practitioners: Peter Walker.

The drawings and photographs in this monograph illustrate the living dynamic processes of landscape design, with leaps of imagination supported by landscape architect Peter Walker's steady direction within periods of creative design synthesis and integration. As can be seen in the resulting body of built landscape design work that spans across the world, creating and shaping landscape form has required a lifetime investment of craft and invention and requires a clear intellectual focus, a deep understanding of landscape design history with as much practical site experience as any designer and design office can muster in a professional life time. In return, a built landscape is made that is clear and strong in its resolution and execution, an art form combining materials, ideas, and meaning, which is simultaneously poetic and pragmatic.

In the intervening years between the initial publication of this book in 2020 and the current conditions of pandemic, climate change, and the concerns of equity and social justice the need for welcoming, well designed, and cultured spaces in the landscape has only intensified. The landscape work of Peter Walker stands out even more as a needed model for these times when outdoor landscapes play an even larger role in the daily lives of residents and their families.

What makes the design work of Peter Walker examined here so original and yet so grounded in place, contemporary culture, and the traditions of the field of landscape architecture is his sensitive combination of natural materials, the immutable, the durable. Design in Peter Walker's landscapes arises carefully from the impact of ideas upon these materials in context. They stem from evolving forms according to surface, function, and texture, the needs of rest and shade, of lawn, of canopy trees, of pathways. They arise from the human wish and need to formulate ideas through design action, to recreate them into entities, so that their meanings will not depart fitfully as they do from the mind, so that thinking and belief and design sensibilities and attitudes may endure as actual things to be engaged with and most importantly be enjoyed by all. Peter Walker's influence on the design field and the landscape discipline is unchallenged, the body of built work worldwide is remarkable and, more significantly, this publication adds to the body of core knowledge about and for landscape architecture now and in the future.

# PREFACE

*“Dig hole... make mound. This is landscape architecture—it’s so simple.”<sup>1</sup>*

Richard Haag

*“To successfully build a fine work of landscape architecture is one of the most difficult tasks in the world of design.”<sup>2</sup>*

Peter Walker

Both of these master designers are correct. In Haag’s declaration, there is the call for an intervention, a reshaping of the ground that marks the beginning for any designed landscape. A seemingly simple topographic operation instantly creates possibilities, there now being a place for water to collect, a change in soils and hydrology expressed through vegetation, a slope to recline upon, a place to gather. Haag’s shorthand summary for how to begin the process of landscape formation relates to his ideals of “non-striving,”<sup>3</sup> where the efforts of the designer are intentionally understated rather than emphasized through the built work. Dig hole, build mound, don’t overthink it—this can be simple.

Simple, but not easy. The divergence from clarity of concept to challenge of implementation could be described by any experienced designer,<sup>4</sup> but when expressed by someone as accomplished as Peter Walker we ought to take notice. Here is a person who has actively been designing landscapes for more than half a century and produced more than a hundred built works, in the process winning scores of awards from those within and also outside of his own discipline. And like star athletes reflecting on past accomplishments, he is reminding us that it is not easy, none of it was easy.



The challenges with any built landscape are diverse and compounding: conceiving and communicating ideas for a medium that is resistant to objectification; the necessary buy-in and financial support from decision makers for something that even if valued might not be considered essential;<sup>5</sup> the sourcing of materials and attempted guidance of a construction process typically driven by a third party; once successfully built, weathering effects brought by environmental exposure and continued use over time; and ultimately, existentially, the shifting needs and values of a surrounding community that may in time no longer consider the landscape worthwhile to maintain or even keep in place.

Built landscapes are difficult to describe, expensive, contested, and vulnerable. To go from design notion to built work to valued community asset—it is one of the most difficult things.

If building a landscape is fraught with so many challenges, what are design strategies that might improve chances of success, however that success might be considered?

#### GOAL OF THIS BOOK

Driving this study is an essential question: what might one learn from a careful examination of Peter Walker's built works, developed across a range of conditions and geographies over the past six decades? With a focus on identifying design strategies embedded within these projects, the book aims to equip landscape architects and other environmental designers with new insight for effectively shaping inhabited outdoor environments—for building landscapes that resonate and endure.

Each of the discussed projects was experienced and documented in person for the purposes of this study, totaling more than forty sites in six countries on four continents. Each of these landscapes is a multi-layered environment that may be accessed, inhabited, examined, and learned from. This is one of the great advantages for students of landscape—that our source material is *out there*—and my observations from these site visits mark the starting point for the identified strategies. The fact that most of these projects have been in place for many years makes them all the more valuable as they each have stories to tell regarding physical weathering and evolving usage over time.

While these projects were sought out and experienced individually, I have prepared the following reflections and integrated desktop studies with the intent that they be as accessible to others as possible. Design—let alone a lifelong career as a creative professional—is challenging enough in its own right.

And who might you be, dear reader? Many of you will be students of design, no matter what your age. For those still early in your career this text will be especially valuable in offering a distinct set of case study sites while, even more

importantly, illustrating how the different systems of landscape may be considered and interrelated at the site scale. My own students have been in mind while creating this book and I have attempted to make the text engaging for readers from a range of contexts. The highlighted design lessons are not dogma, but rather notions that may be embedded into your thinking, ready to be revisited and tested over time.

For more experienced designers there still are discoveries to be made, in addition to new ways of reflecting on your own work. You working professionals will likely have been exposed to some of these projects during your student days and this book offers a chance to see how the landscapes have held up (hint: likely amazingly well).

That is the setup—let us begin the journey.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The text begins with an argument for why it is worthwhile to launch an in-depth tour of Walker's built works in the first place. Chapter one also offers up at the outset (no need to bury the lede) what we can recognize as the key, overarching lessons to be drawn from this portfolio. This introduction presents the origins of this study through an anecdote involving a security guard, a molecular collider, and a misunderstanding.

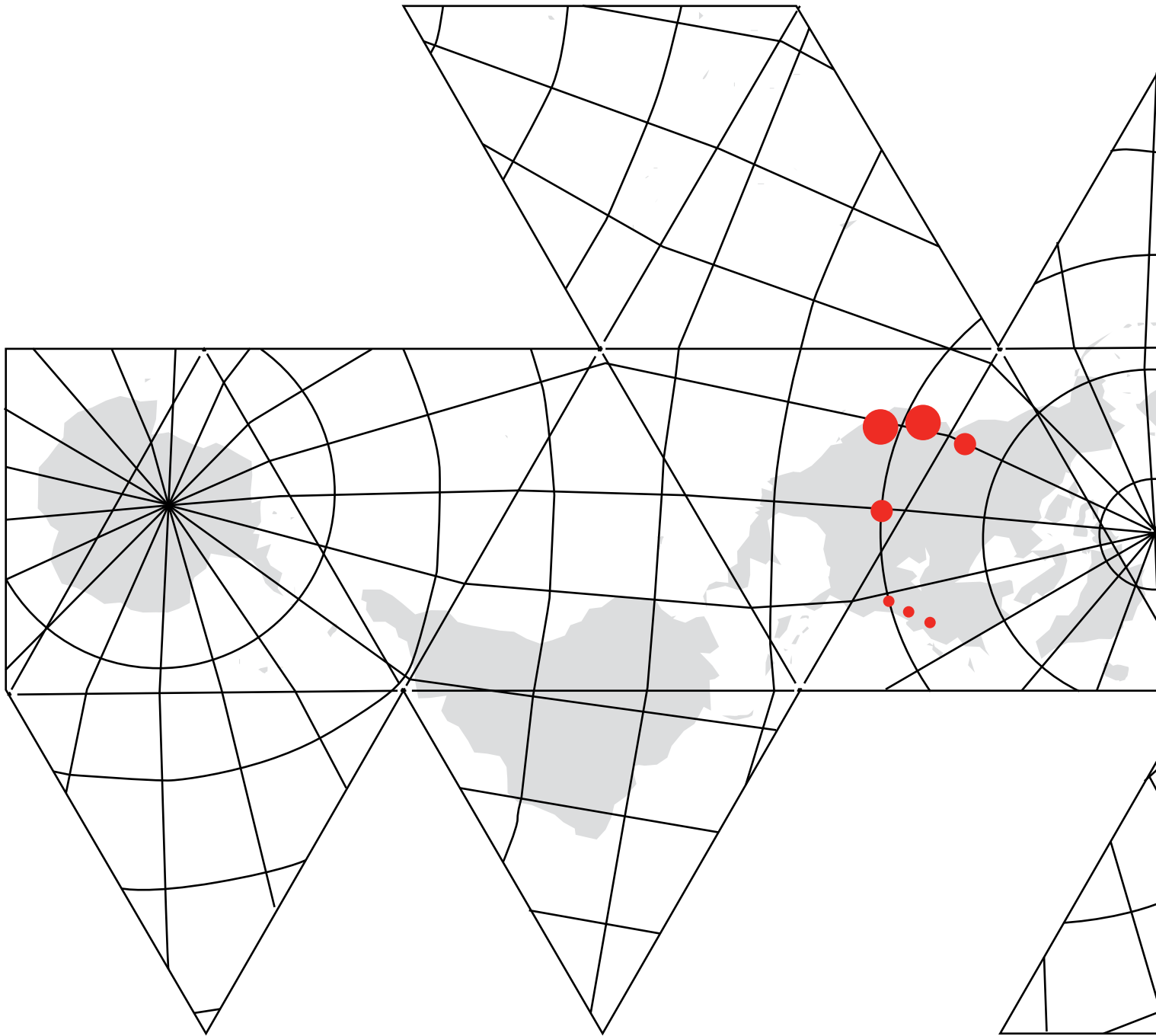
Chapter two gives an overview of Walker's career, illustrating distinct phases while providing an essential timeline for better understanding his professional growth and trajectory. Someone's career is something of a project in itself, and with our detachment and the benefit of hindsight we can recognize some profound lessons within these six decades of design activity. As the rest of the book intentionally does not follow a chronological sequence, chapter two is especially important in defining a temporal structure to which project-related discussions may later be attached.

Chapters three through seven make up the core body of this text, clustered around landscape components of topography, on-structure landscapes, craft, vegetation, and water. Each chapter includes a general discussion of that component's role within landscape architecture, followed by how it has been employed by Walker across a range of built works. Insights gleaned from these projects are clustered as explicit design strategies.

Chapter eight presents a speculative conclusion linking the work of this quintessentially 20th century designer with the challenges and opportunities faced in our 21st century. Highlights from multiple interviews with Peter Walker himself make up the epilogue, reflecting on **landscape as such and legacy of his works**. Finally, the appendix includes additional project details that might be of interest to the reader, in particular site coordinates that may be typed into a map service of choice and used to make a visit to the discussed landscapes—if not in person, then perhaps at least online.

Only some two years after the first edition of this book was published in April 2020, a second and updated edition became necessary. For this new edition, a subject index was added, enabling the reader to quickly find Walker's preferred details and design elements. The foreword, bibliography, and the author's biography have been updated as well.

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- <sup>1</sup> From a question and answer session at the conclusion of a public lecture delivered at the University of Washington in 2003 as part of a retrospective of Haag's legacy. Haag continued, "If you start following this line of thought we'd talk ourselves out of a profession," to which the audience responded with laughter. I was in attendance and at the time an intern in Haag's office.
  - <sup>2</sup> From Walker's introduction to *Visible, Invisible: Landscape Works of Reed Hilderbrand* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2012), 17.
  - <sup>3</sup> For more on Haag's history and philosophy, see Thaïsa Way, *The Landscape Architecture of Richard Haag: From Modern Space to Urban Ecological Design* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).
  - <sup>4</sup> And conversely, casually disregarded by those who have not experienced the challenges of professional practice.
  - <sup>5</sup> A topic still in need of more fully being grappled with by the discipline, advocating for built landscapes even while acknowledging they often perform less than essential roles.



## NOTABLE PROJECTS

### UNITED STATES

#### EAST COAST

NATIONAL SEPTEMBER 11 MEMORIAL  
TANNER FOUNTAIN

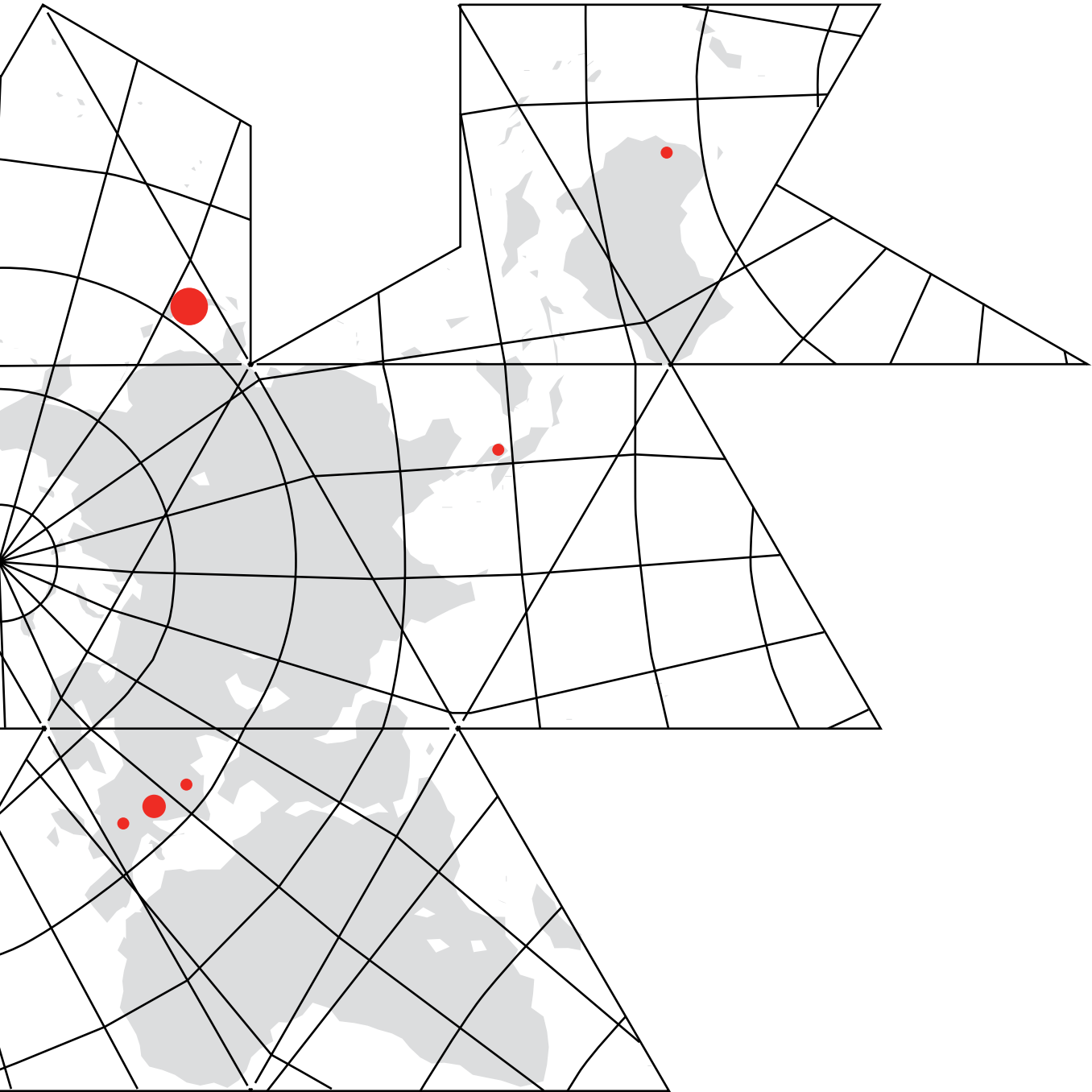
#### SOUTHWEST

BURNETT PARK  
NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER

#### WEST COAST

FOOTHILL COLLEGE  
JAMISON SQUARE  
WEYERHAEUSER HEADQUARTERS

The majority of Walker's projects are concentrated on the west coast of the United States, in addition to notable works in other parts of the country. During the latter half of his career he was also solicited for landscapes in Europe, East Asia, and Australia.



**GERMANY**

SONY CENTER

**SWITZERLAND**

NOVARTIS CAMPUS

**AUSTRALIA**

BARANGAROO

**SINGAPORE**

MARINA BAY SANDS

**JAPAN**

CENTER FOR ADVANCED SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

IBM JAPAN MAKUHARI BUILDING

TOYOTA MUNICIPAL MUSEUM OF ART

# I

# INTRODUCTION

“PETER WALKER!”

The friendly security guard patiently tried to piece together just how our group had arrived unannounced in this otherwise empty entry lounge for the Center for Advanced Science and Technology (CAST), a research facility tucked away in the hills of Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. We would later learn that the guard assumed we were a group of visiting physicists (alas), when in fact this was a dozen landscape architecture students being led by myself and a colleague with an interest in exploring the award-winning landscape of this campus.

Finally, belatedly, we thought to pull up an image of the especially photogenic courtyard on a phone.

“Oh!”

Suddenly there was rapid movement as the guard exited the lobby and gestured to have us follow him into the adjacent building. In front of a large window framing a view of our target, the guard pointed to the courtyard and exclaimed, “Peter Walker!”

Before we all had finished taking our photos he was on the move again, and as we rounded the corner to look through a second window into this rectilinear space, there was the gesture and declaration, “Peter Walker!” Nothing if not thorough, the guard later delivered us to the final viewpoint to this outdoor room and repeated his exclamation, a bright smile of satisfaction on his face.

Most landscape architects have little choice but to come to terms with maintaining a degree of anonymity, as our work is not readily identified and few members of the general public could name a single designer. But on that sunny autumn afternoon within the heart of the sleepy research campus, I was struck by how this facility manager was not only proud of this built landscape but so enthusiastic in declaring the name of its designer—and even more, some two decades after the project’s completion. Precious few landscape architects will be so honored.

## WHY PETER WALKER, WHY NOW

I am fortunate to work at a university with a well-stocked central library. Roaming the shelves to hunt down sources and gather materials for research work, it is simple enough to experience a mixed sensation of optimism and dread: optimism brought by the great wealth of knowledge available, just waiting to be dusted off, checked out, and enjoyed; dread because of what can be a challenge in identifying where to add one's point of light within this constellation. With so much already written, what more needs to be said?

Well, within the discipline of landscape architecture there is a great deal remaining to be explored, intellectually considered, and effectively conveyed. Ours is a young discipline, rich in history, to be sure, and with an outsized influence on our communities, but young nevertheless. As a modern (lower case "m") profession, we have a modest three or so generations of practitioners from whom to reference, investigate, and learn. Even as landscape architecture is currently experiencing an expansion of visibility and scope through increasingly ambitious public works, we still are challenged to advance beyond anecdotal histories and personalized experience. We are still maturing.<sup>1</sup>

A critical review of a collected body of work offers the opportunity to move beyond "one off" individual observations to instead identify more thoroughly tested strategies. Different forms of groupings bring their own benefits: focusing on a certain geography might reflect contextual cultural conditions; works from a specified window of time can relate to the political economy of that era; grouping by typology (i.e. park, campus, etc.) can illustrate evolving expectations and roles played by those project types. These all are valuable options for structuring design scholarship, but if especially concerned about the role of *designers* and lessons to be learned for integrating the different elements of landscape, the most valuable project grouping will be by individual—we must take on a portfolio.

With the goal of identifying distinct design lessons through a study that is one part synthesis and another distillation, the choice of landscape architect to be considered becomes clear: it must be Peter Walker.

Let us briefly consider Walker's curriculum vitae of accomplishments. Honor Award winner from the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the highest honor a living landscape architect may be awarded by the organization. Recipient of Harvard's Centennial Medal, the University of Virginia's Thomas Jefferson Medal, and the International Federation of Landscape Architect's Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe Gold Medal. A graduate of the Harvard University Graduate School of Design (GSD), where he returned to serve as professor and chair to the Department of Landscape Architecture in addition to at one time be acting director of the Urban Design Program. He has fulfilled varying roles of teacher, mentor, and collaborator to some of the most prominent practitioners in the field. Co-founder of Sasaki, Walker and Associates, a trailblazing multi-disciplinary firm that continues to maintain international influence in

its current form as SWA. An author and publisher, his efforts with Spacemaker Press and magazine *Land Forum* in addition to other publications helped elevate both the visibility and discourse of landscape architecture.

To say that Walker has maintained a conspicuous disciplinary presence, especially within the American context, is an understatement. But even more valuable for our concern, he has remained distinctly prolific throughout this extended career, producing a steady stream of built works not just during one particular phase but in fact spanning a very long time. This then forms the second part of our response as to why Walker—there simply is so much material with which to work.

Plus, we now have the opportunity to view this portfolio *in toto*, and while the vast majority of these projects are (thankfully, remarkably) still in good physical condition, nothing should be taken for granted. Even more significantly, we can recognize a current point of transition for the discipline of landscape architecture that allows us to contextualize these studied works with a bit more distance and, perhaps, even greater appreciation.

#### ASSESSING A SINGULAR PORTFOLIO

Walker's portfolio offers a singular resource for learning because of three main characteristics: the extensive time span of its development; the sheer volume of projects included; and the exhibited focus maintained throughout these efforts.

Walker entered practice in the 1950s and continued with project work well into the 2010s. While other practitioners have continued their work well past an expected age of retirement—in fact, this would seem to be an especially notable trend within landscape architecture—Walker not only has remained active into his eighties but also began his career in full force while just in his twenties. This extensive timeline means we have projects available for investigation that were produced within a range of contexts, including: post-WWII economic boom of California; emergence of modern environmental movement; contemporary solidification of corporate power; post-modernism and its aftermath; on to expansive globalization fueled by information technologies. Looking to see how much the project work does or does not respond to these contexts proves to be revealing.

The extensive time span is not populated with a sparse scattering of projects, but rather a multitude of landscapes resulting from a consistently productive pace of professional output. And these are not *paper* projects, living only as ideas (although there are an important few of those)—these are built works that survived the development process and are out in the world, ready to be experienced. This level of productivity might on the face of it seem conventional considering that landscape architects are design professionals and by definition need to take on a steady stream of clients and projects. That is to say, these



are *practitioners* not artists. Even so, in Walker's portfolio we see a high "hit rate" of projects going through to construction, fulfilled by someone who has embraced an attitude of learning through building.

Across these decades of productive effort, there has been a third defining component—a distinctive degree of focus and iterative innovation woven throughout a range of phases, project types, and locales. Landscape architects, like building architects and other designers, benefit from accumulated knowledge gathered through experience. This is one reason why it can often (but not always) take many years before an individual may reach her or his most productive phase. This learning with time is common enough, but in Walker's work we see a heightened degree of focus and embrace of constraints to provide greater clarity on these insights. For example, with specific landscape components such as topography we can witness certain ideas continuing to be tested and adapted through Walker's first dozen built works. This focus can also be recognized in his use of landscape materials, adapting and reusing specific elements through a sequence of projects. At the same time, Walker's grounding in modernism and later embrace of minimalism only reinforced these methods of focused iteration. With formal clarity and elemental use of materials, the essence and limitations of constructed landscapes are consistently embraced.

In landscape, the transect is used as an analytical device to cut through a terrain and highlight relationships between adjacent elements. In a similar fashion, we have the opportunity to consider Walker's productive half century of practice through a kind of temporal transect revealing the state of landscape architecture as a discipline from the post-WWII years through to the beginnings of the 21st century. Even as we learn from this individual's own journey we have the chance to gain insight on the dynamic contexts within which design is being implemented, offering if nothing else a reminder that present conditions are certain to change.

#### SITE DESIGN—DOES IT MATTER?

At a time when the dire consequences of climate change linger, increased wealth disparity holds a divisive pull on communities, dramatic urbanization tests the carrying capacity of regional landscapes while creating new challenges of livability within the city core, does something as modest as site design even really matter? The question has to be asked because what follows is an in-depth interpretation for a body of work that, in the end, is all about built sites, ranging from 1 to 1000 acres. The studied material is not a collection of landscape strategies looking to directly take on environmental challenges, or advance ideas of resiliency and adaptation. In fact, most of these projects are at least on the face of it rather static in so much as is possible with any landscape.

With this kind of background, how relevant can the projects possibly be for present and future challenges? What makes them worthy of investigation? Why should anyone care?

Most importantly, sites operate at a scale somewhere between the individual and a community. They are where we get together, and at their best they are civic. Sites are the inverse of abstract—they are perceptible, identifiable, intelligible. Sites can be valuably mundane in the form of a neighborhood park, regional sports complex, or local school grounds. Sites can be aspirational, as the setting for museums or grounds of a university campus. Yes, they can be exclusive as corporate headquarters or private residences—but sites can also be sacred, as places of worship or memorials for gathering in grief and remembrance.

Sites can also be built—they can be *created*. But to do so well, in a way that maintains a high level of physical integrity while also effectively supporting a range of uses over time is highly challenging. It is in this spirit that the investigation is launched, seeing these works not as models to be directly imitated let alone repeated, but rather to be valued and learned from by a next generation of designers finding their own way.

#### WORD ON CREDIT AND COLLABORATION

Works of landscape architecture demand collaboration, and the examined projects that follow are no exception. So while “Peter Walker” is included in this book’s title and all of the following projects are selected from his portfolio, these works were not developed in a vacuum or completed independently by an *auteur*. Each was realized by a team of individuals—a mix of clients, contractors, junior designers, business partners, technical specialists, and others—working together and fulfilling their individual roles.

Some of these landscapes can be recognized as clearly being very personal to Walker himself, while others had significant design efforts led by staff within Walker’s studio. The design works included for in-depth study were selected for the clarity and directness with which they might illustrate relevant design lessons.

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<sup>1</sup> For further exploration on this idea of maturing see: R.D. Brown and R.C. Corry (2011), “Evidence-based landscape architecture: The maturing of a profession,” *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 100(4), 327–329.