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PATCHWORK GREEN
VISUALIZING LANDSCAPE EVOLUTIONS AT VASSAR COLLEGE



Ann Carriere
15 May 2020

Senior Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

Advised by Tobias Amborst

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All photographs of campus included in this thesis are curtesy of Archives and Special Collections. A special thanks to Dean Rogers, who assisted me along the way.

Thank you, Vassar College, for providing me such a rich and fascinating topic of inquiry. I have not nearly done the wealth of landscape history on this campus justice, but this thesis is, in part, a love letter.

INTRODUCTION.

Over the past four years, Vassar College has served as my classroom, social sphere, and my home. My own personal development into young adulthood seems to me intrinsically bound to the episodic occupation of various spaces on campus. To me, and many other students who have passed through its gates, the campus landscape becomes *charged* with memories. Freshman and Sophomore year, I lived in Main Building; the second of those years I occupied a room on the third floor, front and center. I would wake up every morning to see the dabbled tree line of White pines along Main drive, the sound of visitors arriving, and the rumble of car motors waiting to pick up students. I knew the start of fall and beginning of spring as the rotation of cabbages and tulips in the circular flower bed below. Junior year, I moved to a room in the front of Noyes. The ends of my days were punctuated with a trek across Noyes Circle towards the dotted glow of the building's façade at night. On the weekends, I was awoken by the sound of the Frisbee team practicing on the lawn. After moving off campus my last year of college, I became more aware of the distinct presence of trees on campus. On my daily route to class, I enjoyed looking up as I passed under the branches of an old elm tree in front of Josselyn and the Japanese maples that mark the center of the residential quad. I not only studied at Vassar, I inhabited. I began to wonder as well the intention behind the landscape I had come to view as a second home: In what ways have the geographic nodes I register as

permanent fixtures evolved? When were the trees planted and why? Do others perceive the campus in a similar manner to myself?

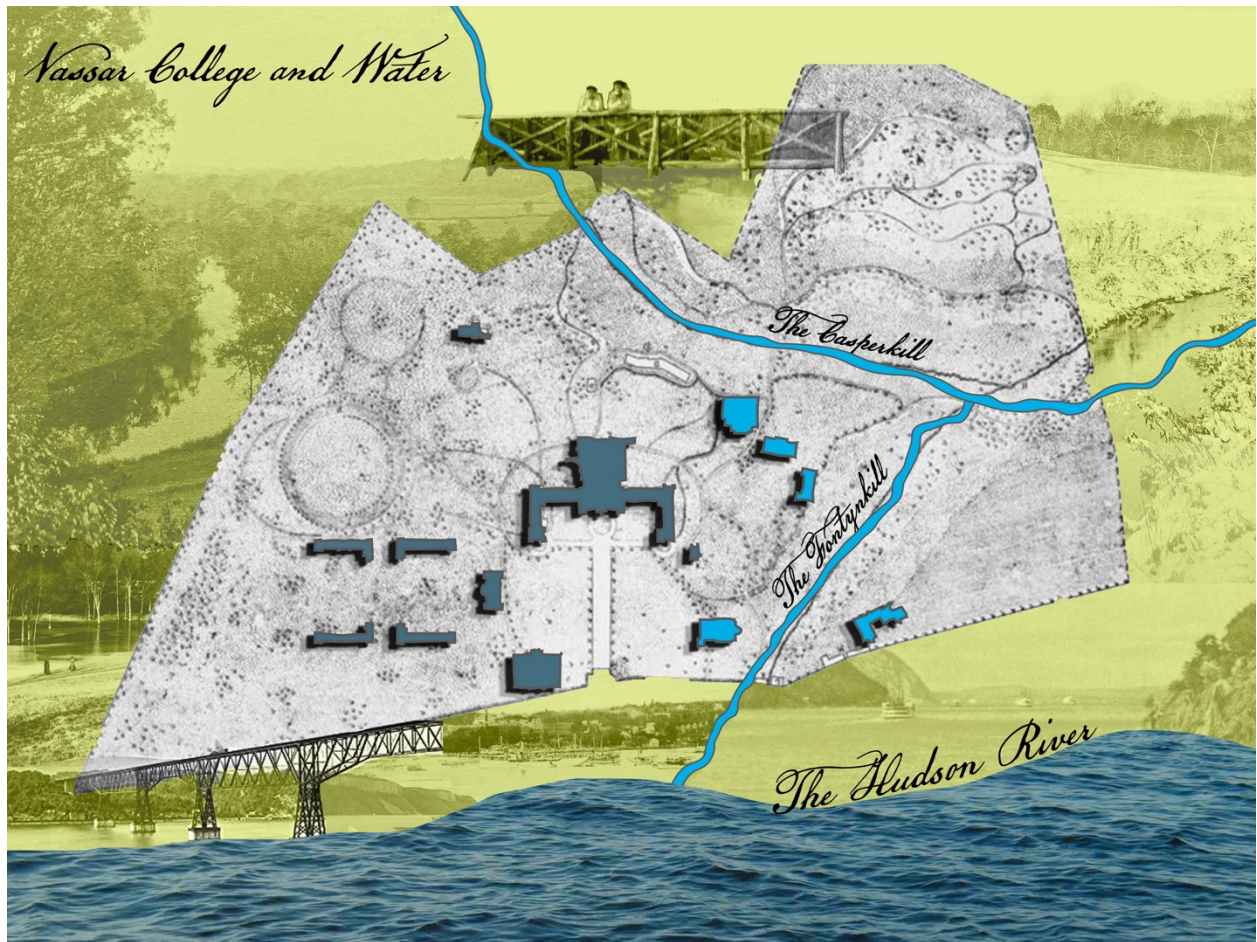
Cultural geographer JB Jackson states, “Almost by definition an inhabited landscape is the product of incessant adaptation and conflict: adaptation to what is often a new and bewildering natural environment, conflict between groups of people with very dissimilar views as to how to make that adaptation.”¹ Though home to an inherently transitory population, Vassar College is, in many ways, a deeply inhabited landscape; adaptation occurs on a micro-level scale, conflict arises due to the often-disparate interests of administration, the Board of Trustees, faculty, and students. In my personal experience, inhabiting Vassar College changed, or at least facilitated, my evolving perceptions of the natural environment in a time plagued by the conversation of global climate change. The seams of its construction are quite nearly hidden by a centuries-old attention to picturesque design; this passage of time allowed trees to grow as if they’d witnessed the land before, it allowed the stitches of a molded landscape to be covered by grasses and vines. However, if one looks carefully, the traces of designer’s hands remain. Focusing my attention on three particular campus landscape nodes, I began to visualize the rich history of landscape architecture at Vassar College and its connection to wider social, cultural, and environmental trends. The inhabitation of campus by marked generations has left ecological imprints of distinctive epochs.

¹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 43.

What follows is a reckoning with the palimpsestic landscape of Vassar College through a micro-lens graphic analysis of three definite nodes on campus: Noyes Circle, the Class Tree Ceremony, and circulation around Main Building. The campus' history and proposed future, hinging on a discussion of preservation and sustainability, ground this visual exploration of landscape as image, artifact, and place-setting, ultimately defining our visceral and imagined relationship to the organic environment.

CHAPTER 1

A Brief History of Landscape at Vassar



This chapter begins with a disclaimer: no complete catalogue of Vassar's landscape history exists, partially due to gaping holes in documentation as well as the lack of attempt to create one. However, a relatively inclusive timeline may be pieced together, forming a fascinatingly divergent narrative of landscape design at Vassar College. The campus, following no single master plan, but a slew of different visions through two shifting centuries, encapsulates a plethora of aesthetic values and formal ideologies regarding the manipulation of the natural and creation of land as scape. Just as the campus' architecture is considered archetypal and a bit hodge-podge, Vassar's landscape design evokes a patchwork green in which nodes and vistas from the past are stitched together in roads and grass and foliage to create a unified campus, all at once a relic and an adaptation.

Before Vassar became Vassar, it was the Dutchess County Racetracks, a spatiality still alluded to in circuitry of the lawn in front of Noyes Building. Before that, the site was largely a flat, barren field.² Matthew Vassar purchased the land that would become the college from the Old Mill Cove estate, owned by one Thomas L. Davies of Poughkeepsie,³ deeming the site far enough from the traffic in the city and the Hudson River to suit a women's college.⁴ Though James Renwick Jr., the architect behind Main Building, laid out the initial plans for roads, paths, and plantings on campus, it was the vision and work of Vassar himself that defined the earliest

² Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide*(New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 29.

³ Helen W Reynolds , "The Campus of Vassar College ," *Vassar Quarterly* , November 1933), 339.

⁴ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy*(Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 149.

iterations of the Vassar College landscape.⁵ Deeply inspired by the work of Andrew Jackson Downing, America's first landscape architect and the designer of Vassar's Springside estate, Matthew Vassar oversaw the planting of 1,000 trees, doubled the size of Vassar Lake, and set aside 70 acres of campus for decorative planting.⁶ He encouraged the orientation of Main to the West towards the Hudson River, creating a clear, cardinal axis on campus and defining a vital relationship between the campus environment and that of the surrounding topography.⁷ Initial buildings on campus would follow this geographical logic, namely Rockefeller, the Observatory, the Powerhouse, and the Quad dormitories; however, later building patterns echoed the looser, more rugged quality of the land surrounding both the Casper and Fontynkil creeks, which continue to ebb through campus. By instilling a formal, geometric logic on campus whilst "taking advantage of the scenic qualities of this [Vassar's] rural setting"⁸ as well, Vassar encapsulated the coexistence of two dichotomized notions: the beautiful and the picturesque.

Defined by Downing, "the Beautiful is nature of art obeying the laws of perfect existence, easily, freely, harmoniously, and without the *display* of power... the Picturesque is nature or art obeying the same laws rudely, violently, irregularly, and often displaying power only."⁹ In pairing these opposing landscape ideologies,

⁵ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 108.

⁶ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 152.

⁷ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 29.

⁸ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 149.

⁹ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 150-152.

Vassar formulated a balanced, symmetrical, and soft setting for central campus, an appropriate environment for a burgeoning all women's college, and left a more rugged, irregular, organic landscape around the periphery and along the Casperkill and Fontynkill Creeks, alluding to a sense of place within the Hudson Valley.

Though Matthew Vassar dictated some of the first sweeping landscape plans for Vassar College, early students played a significant role in the development and texturization of campus. In 1867, Vassar's first graduating class planted ivy along Main building, as well as a Great Swamp Oak and a Weeping Elm near Main's front entrance.¹⁰ Upon their graduation in 1868, they enacted the class tree tradition, which has since helped populate campus with over 150 trees, instilling a vital connection between the college community and the landscape.¹¹ The college's first legitimate garden was spearheaded by faculty and students as well; Dr. Alida Avery, a professor of physiology, organized the Floral Society in the late 19th century as a means of engaging students with the campus landscape.¹² This group encouraged students to plant their own gardens around 'The Circle', now known as Noyes Circle. Early photos of The Circle capture lush gardens and a meandering path. The center of the space remained a trimmed field for sports activities such as tennis and later basketball; this legacy of physical engagement with The Circle continues through the current use of Noyes lawn for frisbee practice.

¹⁰ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide*(New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 32.

¹¹ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*39, no. 2 (2019), 111.

¹² Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide*(New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 34.

In 1905, the college hired landscape architect Samuel Parsons to create a landscape master plan for campus; ¹³ ultimately shirking most of his designs, Vassar's treatment of Parsons' master plan would set the tone for a legacy of half-implemented landscape visions, leading to a heterogenous evolution of landscape vistas on campus. Parsons imagined a 15-acre Beaux Arts configuration for the area south of Vassar Lake, including 10 acres of naturalist garden east of the Chapel.¹⁴ Neither of these visions were realized. From 1915 to 1925, Loring Underwood, author of *The Garden and Its Accessories with Explanatory Illustrations*, served as the first full-time campus landscape architect. Under Underwood, the college dammed the Casperkill to create Sunset Lake and built the adjacent open-air amphitheater,¹⁵ which became a central feature of campus, used for drama productions in the Spring and Fall as well as Graduation. The molding of Sunset Lake and the outdoor amphitheater are campus' most invasive, large scale landscape projects. Though meant to imitate many of the small, hill-bound lakes in the Hudson Valley, Sunset Lake's artificiality, omnipresent in the roaring white water of its dammed side, segments the otherwise contiguous relationship between campus and the natural topography along the Casperkill and Fontynkill.

During Underwood's reign as campus landscape architect, the Shakespeare Garden was built collaboratively by the English and Botany departments to commemorate the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death. Students and faculty worked

¹³ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 108.

¹⁴ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

tirelessly to level and plant the garden, engaging with campus as a living, cross-disciplinary case study. The garden, modeled on Shakespeare's own garden in Stratford-upon-Avon, contained marigolds from this very garden, which students perceived as 'old fashioned' flowers.¹⁶ Shakespeare's original garden took notes from Medieval "Pleasance" gardens as well as the Italian Renaissance, which extended the tiered geometry of the villa to the structure of its surrounding landscape, imposing formal logic into an organic setting.¹⁷ In 1919, the College hired Edith Roberts, renowned professor of botany, who further defined campus landscape as an opportunity for disciplinary study as well as ecological preservation. Along with students in the botany department, Roberts initiated a 4-acre garden along the Fontynkill in 1920, dedicated to the study of native plants.¹⁸ "The Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory," the first of its kind in the country, encouraged a more native landscape and a greater 'sense of place' in landscape design. Roberts would go on to co-write "American Plants for American Gardens" in 1922, one of the first pieces of literature on the utilization of plants native to American ecosystems.¹⁹

In 1923, Henry E. Downer, the Superintendent of Grounds, and Edith Roberts organized several garden conferences for alumni to attend, attempting to elicit donations for large-scale landscape projects. This series led to the Class of 1875's reunion gift, explicitly given to establish an arboretum on campus.²⁰ The same year,

¹⁶ "Shakespeare's Marigolds," *The Vassar Miscellany Weekly* 11, no. 2 (October 20, 1916).

¹⁷ Esther Singleton, *Shakespeare Garden* (Nabu Press, 2010), 23.

¹⁸ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 106.

¹⁹ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 39.

²⁰ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 110.

Vassar hired Beatrix Farrand, the only female member of the ASLA, to create a new master plan for campus.²¹ Though most of Farrand's visions went unrealized, she was the first to propose the notion of a campus-wide arboretum, instead of one confined to an insular plot of land. Farrand emphasized the role of the arboretum as museum and gallery,²² serving to enrich the study of both botany and landscape design. The arboretum commenced with the planting of Viburnums near Vassar Lake; however, control of the project was soon passed to Downer without informing Farrand and in 1928, Farrand offered her resignation.²³

During World War II, large projects on campus stagnated and by 1946, the basic infrastructure and landscape of the campus had been developed. Any large-scale projects remaining, including the construction of Chicago Hall, Noyes Building, Olmsted, and Ferry House sought to minimize topographic impact and minutely altered their surrounding landscapes- though Noyes effectively reframed a landscaped node on campus to be discussed. With the rise of car culture in America, campus dialogue surrounding development on campus shifted from one dictated by creation and alteration, to preservation. In 1969, the college releases an updated campus master plan, intent on maintaining a "walking campus" in the face of automotive mania. It dictated that any further college land to be developed must be done so "in harmony" with the natural features of campus.²⁴ Notably, the plan sought to maintain the "rural character" of the outer lying areas of campus as well, a

²¹ Ibid, 105.

²² Ibid, 110.

²³ Ibid, 126.

²⁴ Vassar College Archives and Special Collections, 1969 Master Plan, 12.

persisting defense of Vassar's unique amalgamation of both the Beautiful and the Picturesque. The same year, students rallied to defend the very tenets expressed by this master plan: when administration pitched a new site for the President's house along the banks of Sunset Lake, students protested en masse and vandalized the site, forcing administration to move the new construction.²⁵

In 1971, a growing interest in environmentalism spurred the first interdepartmental major in ecology and conservation at Vassar and by 1976, 276 acres of land at the farm were designated as an ecological preserve.²⁶ If the college hadn't solidified itself in the academic conversation concerning environmentalism during Edith Roberts' vital spearheading of the Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory, then it did so with the Vassar Ecological Preserve. Commenting on the vitality of Vassar's landscape design in the context of a rising environmental movement, historian Karen van Lengen states, "its fabrication from within has reinforced and promoted the development of one of the nation's earliest academic traditions in the study of ecology, land conservation, and the American landscape."²⁷

After the 1970s, two major externally developed master plans, both quasi-implemented, reflect the ideologies of the eras in which they arose. In 1988, Vassar President Fergusson hired Sasaki Associates to develop "a comprehensive master plan for the maintenance and preservation of the historical structure of the landscape with an emphasis on the pedestrian experience."²⁸ The plan outlined a

²⁵ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy*(Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 162.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁷ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide*(New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 42.

²⁸ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide*(New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 42.

comprehensive revitalization of roads, paths, and lawns and a hope to re-integrate Vassar Lake into the life of the college. Though the latter proposition failed, the issue of campus-wide circulation became a mainstay in conversations regarding landscape. The second of these plans, the 2011 Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Master Plan, brings us to contemporary discussions surrounding sustainability and ecology. Prefacing the new plan with an analysis of Vassar's historically picturesque landscape, the MVVA plan attempts to frame any new development within a more traditional context. The introduction states, "Elements of the picturesque at Vassar include a strong preference for variety and intricacy, curvilinear pathways, and an overlapping of heterogenous yet harmonious compositions of foreground, middle ground, and background."²⁹ This essentialization of *heterogeneity* as the binding principle guiding the Vassar landscape thus allows for proposed alterations, including a reduction of parking polluted central campus, a prioritization of campus plantings that revive the 'horticultural health' of campus, and an increase in pedestrian circulation paths to better serve the picturesque nature of campus.³⁰

²⁹ *Vassar College Landscape Master Plan* (New York, NY: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, 2011), 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO

The Meaning of a Flower Circle: a palimpsestic adaptation



19th century botanist and landscape gardener John Claudius Loudon, coiner of the term 'arboretum' and general practitioner of picturesque landscapes throughout England, outlined three requirements of landscape gardening: "first, garden designs were not to imitate nature or be mistaken for a work of nature. Second, design compositions were to have geometric forms, of which the circular flowerbed with a single species was preferred. Finally, gardens were to be kept in the highest possible order displaying a high degree of care and never be allowed to appear unkempt."³¹ His rhetoric, implemented widely in England as well as the United States under the stylistic guidance of Andrew Jackson Downing, is legible in the configuration of the campus flower garden. Visible in early campus maps and later aerial photographs, the flower circle maintained an intentional circular geometry with distinctive plantings and a structural precision that alludes to Loudon's ideas of landscape formality.

Initially, the garden was commanded by the Floral Society in the hopes that each student would have her own bed to care for.³² Though disparate from the landscape of the Old World both ecologically as well as culturally, the early stages of American landscape design still relied on a deeply historic gendering of 'the garden.' An almost ancient conceptualization of space, "one of the oldest of Roman laws stipulates that the garden is the woman's domain," the garden has long stood as a feminized sphere.³³ Though more loosely translated in America as the frequent upheaval of colonial life negated the geographic stability necessary to maintain a

³¹ Raffaella Fabiani Giannetto, ed., *Foreign Trends in American Gardens a History of Exchange, Adaptation, and Reception*(Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 35.

³² "Changes to Be Made in Athletic Circle," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 6, no. 6 (October 15, 1921).

³³ John Brinckerhoff. Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 123.

garden, this landscape ideal persisted. Early connections drawn between the 'garden' and the sphere of womanhood is crucial in understanding the deliberate landscape of Vassar, meant in part to both educate and protect the 'fairer sex.'

Not only was the flower circle inorganically geometric (a circuitry perhaps formed by the repetitive clomping of horsing warming up to race during the site's pre-campus use), its original plantings consisted of homogenous white pines, planted by Matthew Vassar himself and distinctive annual flowers, most non-native to the Hudson Valley: white narcissus, pink and yellow tulips, Korean azaleas, roses, Japanese anemones, chrysanthemums, snowdrops, daffodils, lavender crepe myrtle blossoms, and squat primroses.³⁴ These valuable flowers alluded to a worldliness and aesthetic finesse not unlike the English garden, placing Vassar's campus, and thus the college, in the realm of its prestigious male counterparts. With the construction of Ely Hall, the campus gymnasium, in 1890, the flower circle became an activated space, relabeled the 'athletic circle,' serving as stage for a variety of physical activities, such as tennis, baseball, archery, and field hockey.³⁵ However, the college continued to maintain its pristine flower beds as the circle had become one of Vassar's landscape treasures, considered "as much a part of old time Vassar as the Observatory."³⁶

³⁴ "White Narcissus and Tulips Out This Week," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 16, no. 40 (April 30, 1932).

³⁵ "Circle Open for Varied Recreational Activities," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 12, no. 3 (October 8, 1927).

³⁶ "Changes to Be Made in Athletic Circle," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 6, no. 6 (October 15, 1921).



A study of the Flower Circle's original species.

As the garden evolved, specifically under Downer's reign as groundskeeper through the 1930s, the site lost its significance as an extension of physical education. Downer discouraged runners from passing through the Circle by getting rid of the original Cinder Path that ran through the center.³⁷ He did away with the network of small, informal paths in favor of one wide walkway around the periphery and moved away from the labor-intensive Spring/Summer cycle of planting annuals by incorporating more perennials.³⁸ Though these alterations increased the functionality of the Flower Circle, they also deactivated the role of students in actively defining a central landscape node.

During the construction of Noyes Circle in 1957, half of the flowers beds in the circle were removed.³⁹ Vassar's original trees had also grown too tall and shaded the other beds, which ultimately led to the removal of the remaining beds.⁴⁰ After the completion of Noyes Dormitory, the circle became referred to as 'Noyes Circle,' reflecting a paradigm shift in the landscape from garden to architectural setting. Indeed, by the 1970s, what was left of the once beautiful and manicured garden had fallen to seasons of disregard. Contemporary students find little trace of what the Noyes Circle garden once was. Several of Vassar's original pines still stand. The circuitry of the site remains and several desire paths that zigzag the central lawn echo the Cinder Path that once was. Most vitally perhaps is the presence of the frisbee

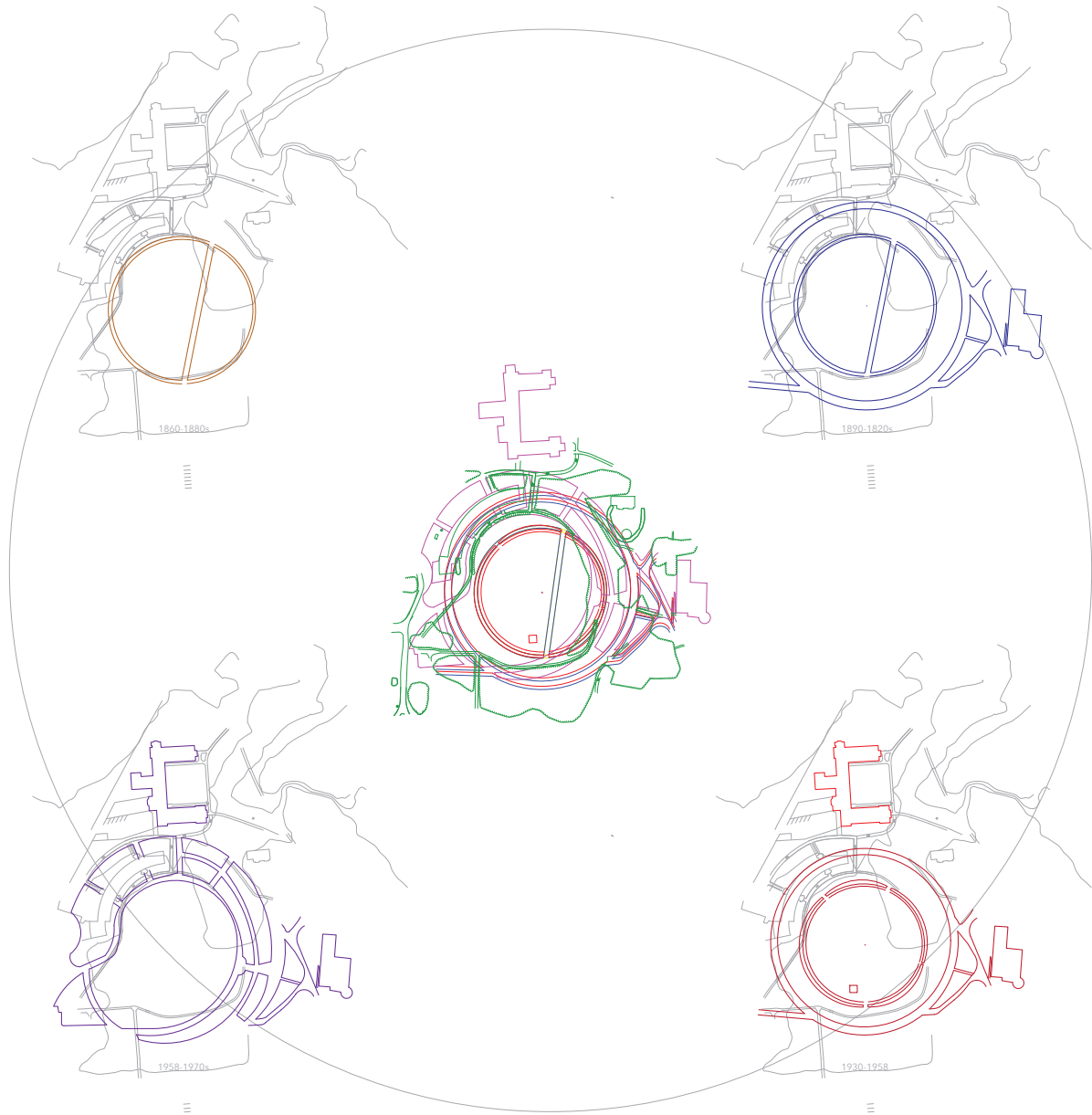
³⁷ "Downer Describes Changes in Circle," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 23, no. 14 (November 16, 1938).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Emma Hartman Noyes House - Vassar College Encyclopedia - Vassar College, accessed May 13, 2020, http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/buildings-grounds/buildings/Emma_Hartman_Noyes_House.html).

⁴⁰ Informal Interview with Head Gardener Martin Pinnavaia - Vassar College Encyclopedia - Vassar College, accessed May 13, 2020, <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/interviews-reflections/head-gardener-martin-pinnavaia.html>).

team on any given morning, activating the circle as it was once was. The slow decline and divestment from the flower garden signal a greater trend on campus: a shift away from formal-and expensive- landscaping towards a more ecological focus on restoration and conservation.



A cyclical evolution of the Flower Circle, ending in the central palimpsest.

CHAPTER 3

The Class Tree Tradition: an arboreal timeline



They stand around us, the most prominent and ubiquitous forms on the planet. They are in essence, our life force. Yet, trees garner no greater standing in the eyes of an average passerby than the patchwork of grass, shrubs, greenery that is the natural environment we inhabit. Contrary to our habitual blindness, trees serve as active entities in the landscape, sustaining ecological importance and complex cultural narratives. Consider the forest of the Middle Ages: more a legal distinction than an environmental one, the 'forest' emerged in the English language as a distinction for a wooded, geographic realm reserved for the hunting and occupation of nobility.⁴¹ This early association of the forest with the ruling class may explain in part our perceived disposition of trees as 'noble.' Consider the role of trees in the American zeitgeist as well: the Hudson River School, specifically the work of landscape painter Thomas Cole, propagated a distinctly American Picturesque, claiming "the wild grandeur of our western forests... [is] unsurpassed by any of the boasted scenery of other countries."⁴² This identification of the forest as an abounding wilderness feeds directly into the ethos of manifest destiny, the tree ostensibly becoming the symbol of American spirit through geographical conquest. Not only do ideological associations persist in our primal conceptions of the natural environment, the active selection and planting of trees illuminates clear preference for species, due in part to their inherent biological qualities, but for their cultural symbolism and historic significance as well.

Cultural geographer J.B. Jackson muses on the importance of trees:

"The value of trees is not only that they can be beautiful and that they give us shade and privacy and coolness in the summer; they also demand our attention and

⁴¹ John Brinckerhoff. Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 76.

⁴² Ibid, 83.

care. We are constantly interacting with trees: some of them give us fruit, others give us firewood, and all have to be thought about and even worried about when we consider the future. In brief, trees give us a sense of responsibility and sometimes a kind of parental pride; each domesticated tree calls for an individual response, a response far richer, far more rewarding than a strictly passive—aesthetic or ecological—response to the forest.”⁴³

Taking this emotional engagement one step further, planted trees not only demands attention from the individual, they hold within their ever-growing branches the histories of every such individual who cared for the tree. Arguably, tree rings are one of the most stunning examples of “embodied history,” offering “a vivid instantiation of the way in which living beings ‘carry’ their past into the present.”⁴⁴ The tree is a profoundly historic entity, recording the industrial revolution’s carbon footprint, the alternating between hot and cold summers, the carving of lovers in its bark, standing testament to the passing of centuries. In *Plant-Thinking*, Michael Marder claims, “trees are a synecdoche for the environment.”⁴⁵ I argue, to a certain extent, the class tree tradition at Vassar College is a synecdoche for the campus’ relation to the environment.

⁴³ John Brinckerhoff. Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 95.

⁴⁴ Dalia Nassar and Margaret M Barbour, “What Can an Embodied History of Trees Teach Us about Life? - Dalia Nassar & Margaret M Barbour: Aeon Essays,” Aeon, October 16, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/what-can-an-embodied-history-of-trees-teach-us-about-life>).

⁴⁵ Ibid.



Vassar College Class Tree Inventory

The class tree ceremony, inaugurated in the year 1867 with the planting of a White Swamp Oak and a Weeping Elm in front of Main Building, was devised to both populate the newly christened campus with a variety of trees and also give each graduating class a lasting claim to the landscape.⁴⁶ In its earliest iterations, the tree planting ceremony proceeded with an almost carnival-like vigor. Students dressed up in themed costumes, put on a play for gathered spectators, and sang a class marching song written for the occasion. The Class of 1915 performed a three-part play, uniting ancient clans to worship the tree. One spectator noted, "it was not only a charming representation but also a real ceremony which united the members of the class in a common sympathy."⁴⁷ Van Lengen argues that the popularity of the tree ceremony on campus reflected a national trend towards the "appreciation and preservation of the American landscape, prominently celebrated by the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916."⁴⁸ A student in 1928 mused that the ceremony was more than an arbitrary tradition, it served as a "personal expression" of class pride, memorializing the student body's voice at a distinct moment in time.⁴⁹ Though the camaraderie and festivity of the class tree ceremony has deflated over the past several decades, as students have access to cars and can thus seek off-campus entertainment, the tradition persists to this day.

Piecing through Arborscope, the online platform for mapping campus trees, I am left with a partial impression of tree planting through Vassar's history. Each tree

⁴⁶ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 32.

⁴⁷ "Sophomore Tree Ceremonies," *The Vassar Miscellany* 44, no. 17 (May 14, 1915).

⁴⁸ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 156.

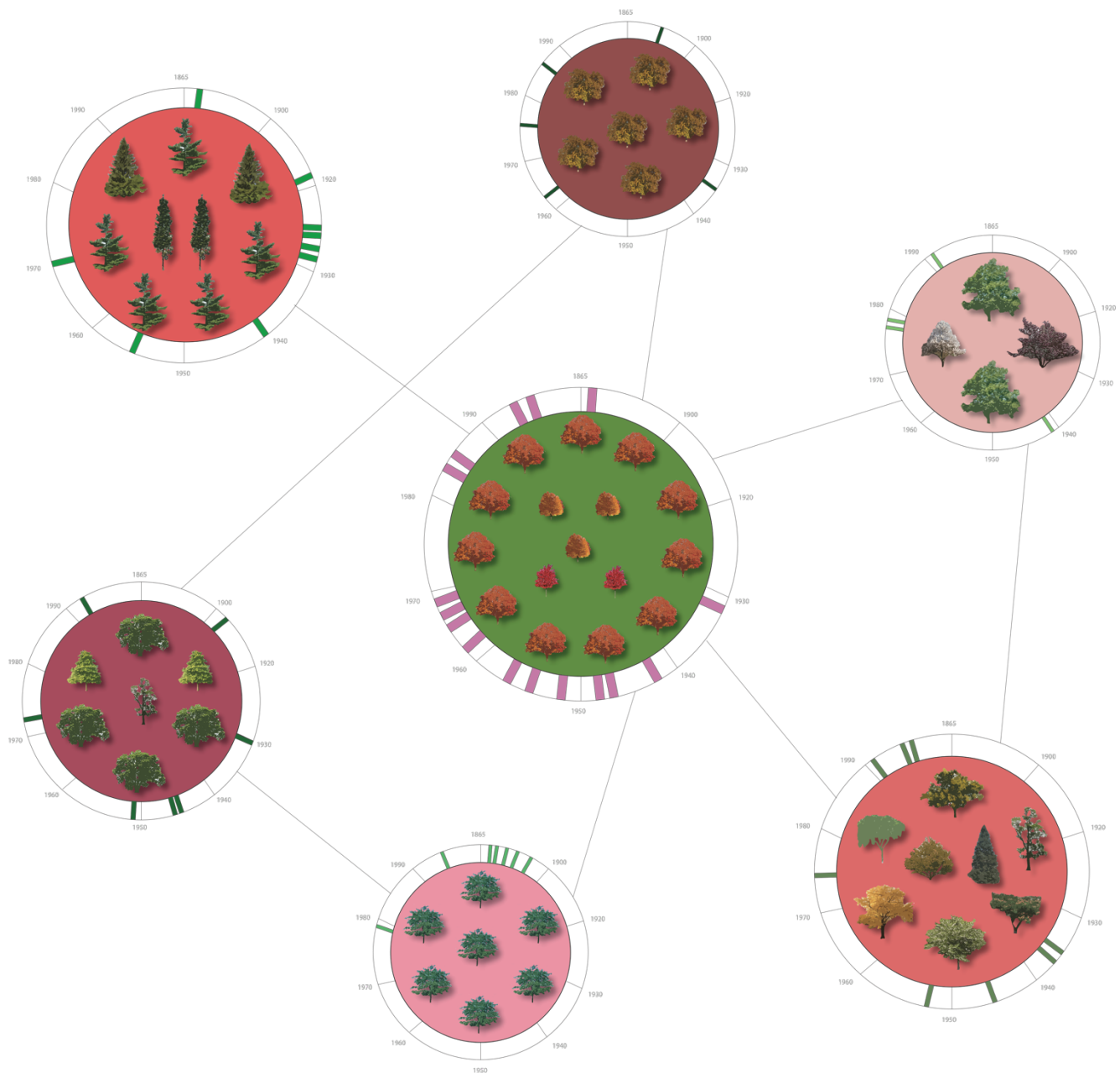
⁴⁹ "Defense of Tree Ceremony Made," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 12, no. 22 (January 14, 1928).

serves as a time capsule, indicating the passage of a year, the graduation of a class, and a temporally distinct perspective on landscape. The first class tree documented on Arborscope is a Sugar maple, planted in 1870. In fact, the Sugar maple is the most widely planted class tree on campus; the map indicates eleven existing class Sugar maples, at least one planted nearly every decade. Why the Sugar maple? Native to the forests of the East Coast, Midwest, and Northern Canada, the Sugar maple has long stood as a valuable tree, both culturally and economically. The Native Americans tapped its trunk to extract its sweet syrup for consumption.⁵⁰ This technique was coopted by English settlers for the profitable production of maple syrup. The wood of the tree itself is a popular commodity, its density useful in the construction of furniture, instruments, and baseball bats.⁵¹ However, its economic merits bear no direct relevance to its planting on campus; rather, its cultural significance and decorative appeal solidify its place as the most popular class tree on campus. According to an 1890 article in *Scientific American*, the Sugar maple “is one of the finest of the deciduous leaved trees of North America.”⁵² The article goes on to claim, “it is by far the *noblest* of the American maples,” considering the elegant spread of its branches and brilliant autumnal colors. In planting Sugar maples on campus, Vassar contextualizes the campus within its natural surroundings and pays tribute to an American legacy.

⁵⁰ “Sugar Maple,” Yale Nature Walk, April 13, 2014, <https://naturewalk.yale.edu/trees/sapindaceae/acer-saccharum/sugar-maple-17>.

⁵¹ “Sugar Maple,” Yale Nature Walk, April 13, 2014, <https://naturewalk.yale.edu/trees/sapindaceae/acer-saccharum/sugar-maple-17>.

⁵² “The Sugar Maple,” *Scientific American* 62, no. 16 (April 19, 1890): pp. 247-247).



6 zones connoting the most common tree types found in the class tree inventory ringed with a timeline displaying each trees' planting.

Inspired by the realization that some species seem to be more popular than others, I proceeded to categorize class trees into zones based on typology, finding the second most prolific class tree type to be the Thornless honeylocust. The distribution of its planting is much less even than the Sugar maple; most of the honeylocusts were planted in the late 19th century, not including the stray tree or two planted in the 1970s and 1990s. Native as well to North America, particularly Midwestern states, Pennsylvania, and Nebraska, the Thornless honeylocust is widely used as a street tree in American cities due to its resilience and dappled shade cover that allows for turf-grass and perennials to grow beneath its branches.⁵³ A 1939 bulletin from the Arnold Arboretum encouraged New England towns to plant both Sugar maples and Thornless Honeylocusts along their wider boulevards, appealing to “a public which is becoming increasingly plant conscious.”⁵⁴ Visible on the mapping of class trees across campus, all of the Thornless honeylocusts planted reside along the Main traffic arterial that runs through the center of campus, alluding to a long-standing notion that the tree does well near roadways.

This observed ‘plant consciousness’ in the Arnold Arboretum *Bulletin of Popular Information* speaks to a shifting awareness and concern for environmental conservation at the turn of the 20th century. At Vassar, this manifested in two important figures: Edith Roberts and Beatrix Farrand. Roberts, hired to the Botany department in 1919, emphasized native ecology in her teaching and encouraged a

⁵³ USDA NRCS, “Honey Locust,” Plant Guide, https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/pg_gltr.pdf

⁵⁴ Donald Wyman, “New England Must Plant Trees This Spring!,” *Bulletin of Popular Information* 7, no. 4 (May 5, 1939).

more native landscape and 'sense of place' in the design of campus.⁵⁵ Farrand, a notable landscape architect hired to assist the design of a campus master plan in 1925, championed native species and planted the seed for a campus-wide arboretum, which would later be taken up (arguably unjustly coopted) by the groundskeeper, Henry E. Downer.⁵⁶ Though Farrand's power over the landscape campus waivered, her opinion that an arboretum could serve as a valuable teaching tool in the study of botany left a lasting impression, evident in the more diversified class tree plantings after the 1920s.⁵⁷ A more distant, but nevertheless important individual in the discussion of trees planted through the 1920s and 30s is Franklin D. Roosevelt. A member of Vassar's board of trustees from 1923 until his death in 1945, Roosevelt encouraged the addition of pines trees near the newly constructed Sunset Lake "as a practical demonstration of the principle of reforestation."⁵⁸ Around the same time, the class tree inventory indicates a majority planting of documented evergreens, including the Douglas Fir, Eastern White Pine, and Norway Spruce.

⁵⁵ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy*(Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 166.

⁵⁶ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*39, no. 2 (2019).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy*(Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 163.



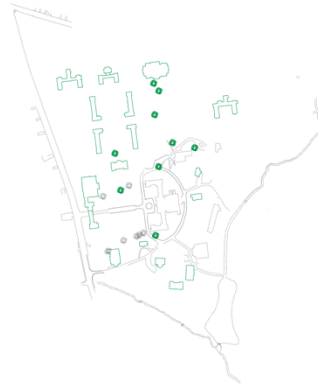
Class trees across campus.

After the 1930s, class trees diversify from three main types to a variety of more decorative and visually expressive trees. Beginning with the planting of a Japanese *Stewartia* and *Ginkgo* in 1936 and 1937 respectively, the campus arboretum began to favor trees from East Asia. Photographer and activist Dorothy Meigs Eidlitz, Class of 1914, wrote in the *Vassar Quarterly* May 1934 an article entitled "Envoys from Japan," stating in reference to the Japanese Cherry Trees on campus (a gift from the Japanese Government), "international messages of good will are not always expressed in words."⁵⁹ Meigs equates this arboreal exchange with an act of diplomacy, eluding to the Chinese Exclusion Act, not repealed until 1943, and a politicization of cultural goods, including trees. Whether or not the planting of other East Asian species, such as the Chinese Elm and Japanese Snowbell, on campus carried with it such inclusionary intentions remains questionable; however, this diversification of tree type did lead to an important biological heterogeneity on campus as the arboretum as a whole began to serve academic purposes. This biodiversity reflects the architectural pastiche of campus as well, creating a stylistic continuity between buildings and landscape vital to the aesthetic identity of Vassar's campus. Referencing the campus graphic, I observed that many of these trees, though planted across decades, are often planted together by species, bolstering a persisting perception of campus as a picturesque landscape defined by distinctly unique landscape nodes.

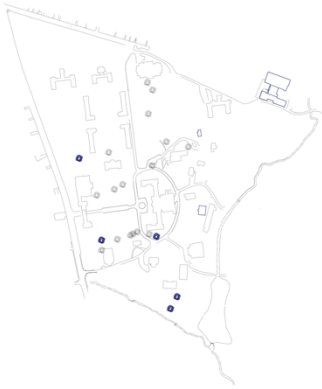
⁵⁹ Dorothy M Eidlitz, "Envoys from Japan," *Vassar Quarterly*, May 1934).



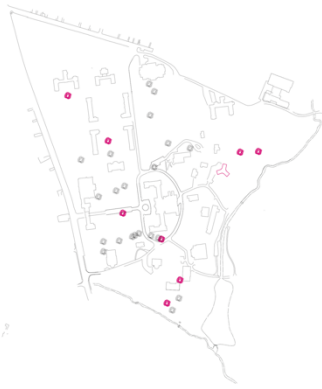
1865-1900



1900-1929



1930-1939



1940-1949



1950-1959



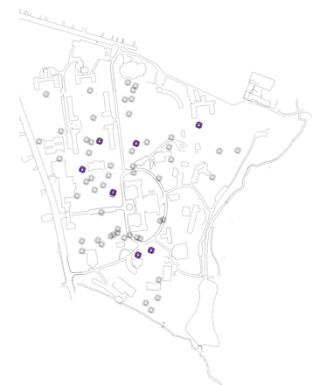
1960-1969



1970-1979



1980-1989



1990-1999



2000-2019

CHAPTER 4

Main Drive and Beautiful Circulation: a vehicular conflict

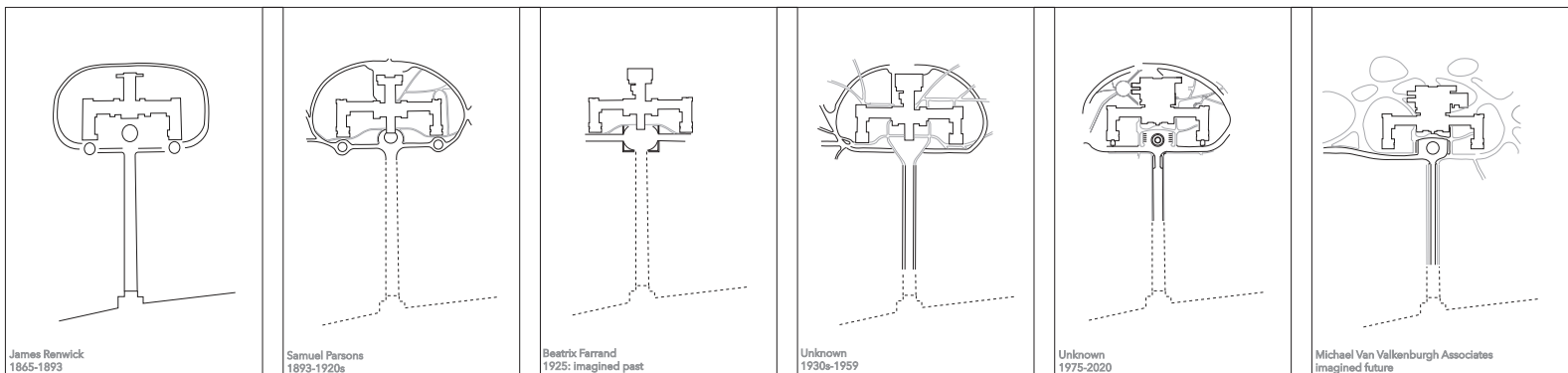


Passing through the threshold of Main Gate into campus, one leaves behind the congestion of Raymond Avenue and to face the grandly framed spectacle that is Main Building. One of Vassar's most iconic vistas, the straight road lined with trees leading to the entrance of the largest building on campus, and at one point the largest building in the US, demands a level of pomp and formality unparalleled on the rest of campus. The almost theatrical procession into campus along Main Drive and around Main Circle signals to the visiting individual that they have left the congestion of Raymond Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood behind, entering a landscape unburdened by many contemporary spatial use and planning demands. However, even the seemingly strict regularity of Main's landscape has mutated to meet shifting preferences, particularly the desire for car-centered circulation. Though in many ways disparate from the picturesque nature of campus, Main building's circulatory design plays an integral role in the experience of Vassar as an academic park and historic landscape.

Main Building, designed by James Renwick Jr. in the fashionable Second Empire style, was modeled on such structures as Guy's Hospital in London and the Tuileries in Paris.⁶⁰ Though technically a revival of a 17th century architectural style rendered by Francois Mansart, for whom the iconic mansard roof is named, the popularity of the Second Empire style in America coincided with Napoleon's redevelopment of Paris and was thus considered a contemporary aesthetic rather than revivalist. Concurrent with this distinctive, formidable architecture was an attention to landscape as a means

⁶⁰ John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy*(Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 149.

to establish order and logic in the environment. In drawing inspiration from the Tuileries in Paris, Renwick and Vassar extended the aesthetic values of the French formal garden to Vassar's campus, expending attention to proportionality, geometry, particularly the use of circle beds, and sight lines.⁶¹ It follows that this mathematical approach to design would appeal to Vassar, wanting to establish a women's college of the same intellectual caliber as its male counterparts as well as clearly delineate the surveyed land of central campus from the surrounding town and countryside. The formality of Main Circle, residing in an otherwise irregular landscape, alluded to Downing's theory that both the Beautiful and Picturesque could coincide in the American landscape.⁶²



Evolution of Main building and its surrounding landscape, real and imagined.

⁶¹ Mukerji, Chandra. "Reading and Writing with Nature." *Theory and Society* 19, no. 6 (1990). <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00191893>.

⁶² John Beardsley and Daniel M. Bluestone, *Landscape and the Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2019), 153.

Architects after Renwick adapted the initial structure and landscape, contending with evolving campus uses and a fundamental change in the way people circulate through space through technological advancement. Initially, the influence of the Tuileries and French formal garden design is apparent; the symmetrical roadway and three circular garden beds in front of the building sufficiently guided carriage circulation without convoluting the intended simplicity of the landscape around central campus. However, the production of the model T in 1908 as well as the increased popularity of bicycles created a demand for more extensive roadways to and from Main building. Visible in the above graphic, Parsons' plan extended the circulation around campus while still maintaining for the most part the singularity of the axial delineations and circular planter beds. Further continuing the legacy of the Tuileries, Parsons encouraged the planting of spruce trees around the quadrangles formed by the architectural arms of Main, popular in the French garden.⁶³

Landscape architect Beatrix Farrand would inherit this vision for Main in 1925. Farrand, inspired more by Gertrude Jekyll and the fundamentals of English Garden design, suggested a square courtyard defined by neatly pruned Yew hedges around Main's central pavilion, a reduction from three to one circular flower bed in front of Main, and in juxtaposition, a more informal scattering of Yews and crabapples in the quadrangles.⁶⁴ College President MacCracken's harsh response to Farrand's initial

⁶³ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 118.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

plans reveals a distinct shift from an almost entirely rhetorical landscape design to one defined by car circulation, stating, "A big area of dusty asphalt or macadam immediately in front of the office windows will not be agreeable, and it will inevitably be filled up with parked cars which will be an eyesore, and the noise and odor of their engines will be an added nuisance."⁶⁵ Space for bike racks was also cited as an important design feature.⁶⁶ The only fully rendered element of Farrand's original plans was the planting of yews and crab apples in the quadrangles; however, the influence of her circulation improvements underwrite the development of Main's landscape.

In 1934, an article in the *Miscellany News* attempts to outline new regulations for a presumed increase in cars on campus. The author, whose statement bears the approval of President MacCracken, promotes the absence of cars on Sundays and holidays, deters students from using cars to attend class, asks that cars not be left on campus overnight, and reminds readers of the pedestrian right of way.⁶⁷ Indeed, the discussion of cars on campus increased in volume through the 1930s and 40s as more students and faculty began to rely on vehicular transit off and on campus. An idea so foreign to contemporary students, the question of a campus curfew created a stir in 1953 as the Friday night curfew was extended, consequently extending the restriction of cars on campus until 11:30 PM on weekends.⁶⁸ The rise of car culture

⁶⁵ Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan, "Beatrix Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 39, no. 2 (2019), 120.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁷ "Campus Traffic Rules Revised and Reissued," *The Vassar Miscellany News* 18, no. 28 (February 14, 1934).

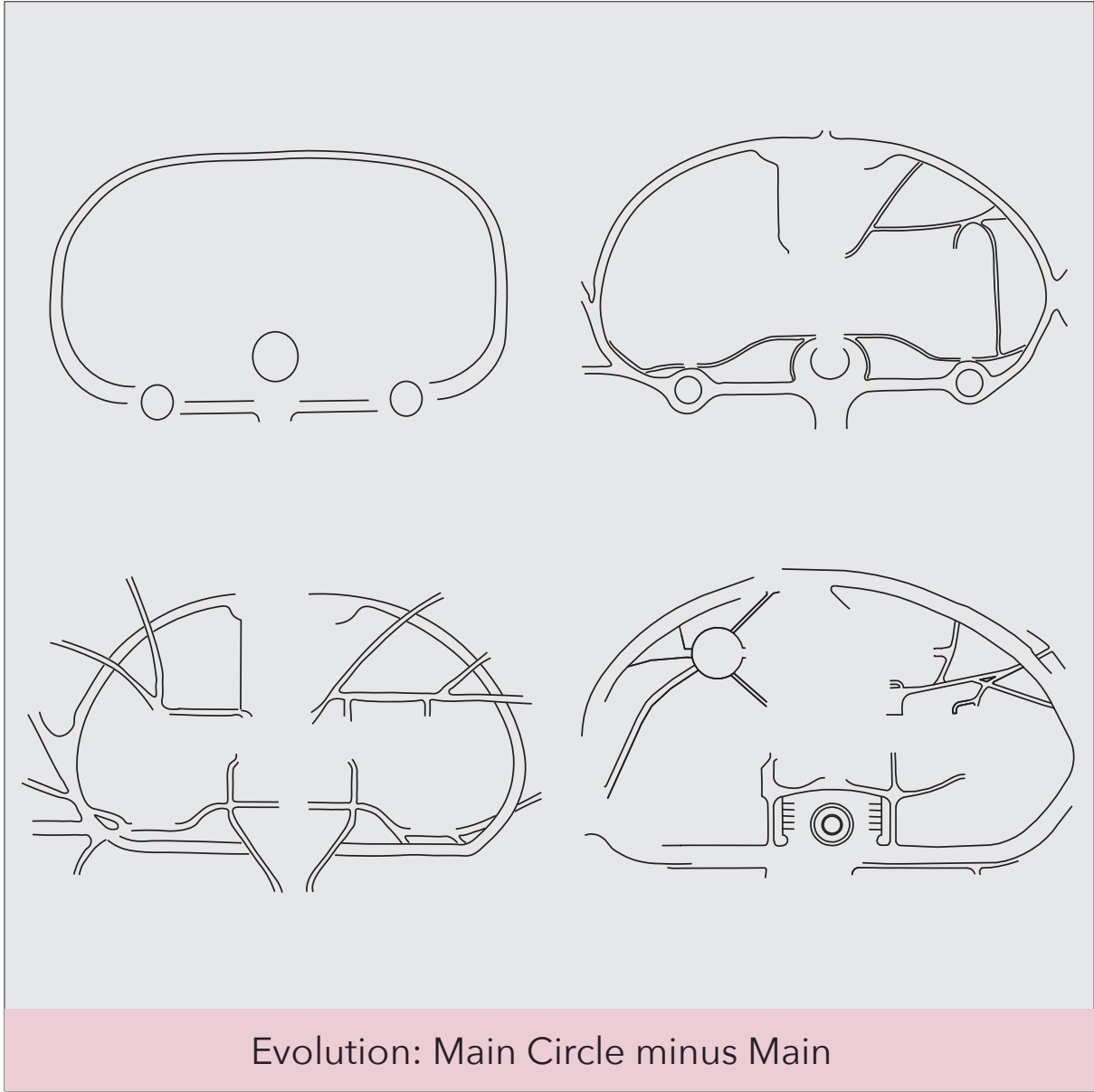
⁶⁸ "Curfew, Car Rules Altered By Senate," *Vassar Miscellany News* 38, no. 10 (December 2, 1953).

informed not only students' understanding of their mobility, but a reconstruction of campus landscape in favor of vehicular circulation; however, the desire to maintain the pedestrian-oriented picturesque landscape persisted. The campus master plan drafted in 1969 encouraged the "preservation of the quality of open-spaciousness" and emphasized the identity of Vassar as a "walking campus."⁶⁹

The preference for an easily accessible landscape, particularly around Main and central campus, led to the hiring of Sasaki Associates in 1987 to develop "a comprehensive master plan for the maintenance and preservation of the historical structure of the landscape with an emphasis on the pedestrian experience."⁷⁰ Though much of the Master Plan's rhetoric did in fact include historic preservation, most of the firm's design suggestions focused on the expansion of road, paths, and parking spaces. The influence of the plan is visible in the most current landscape iteration around Main. Parking spaces take up much of the pavilion in front of the Main entrance and line the central boulevard as well as the road around the building. The 1975 college center add on to the back of the original structure denies the symmetrical logic of the initial design and impacts the pedestrian circulation and irregular entrances to the building. The only persisting formality of Renwick's initial design is the axial condition of main drive and the circular flower bed in front of Main, a visual staple defined by cabbages in the fall, tulips in the spring, and a Japanese maple in its center.

⁶⁹ Vassar College Archives and Special Collections, 1969 Master Plan, 12.

⁷⁰ Lisa A. Reilly, Karen Van Lengen, and Will Faller, *Vassar College Campus Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2003), 42.



The most recent attempt to address the discontinuity between the intended design of circulation around Main and the current design resides in the Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates 2011 Master Plan for Vassar College. The plan brings to light “a radical transformation [of campus] in which an extensive vehicular circulation system, including a profusion of roadways and parking lots, has been forced into a site originally meant to be a naturalistic, pedestrian-focused landscape.”⁷¹ Thus, the MVVA master plan details a limitation of car circulation around Main building, the removal of parking spots along the front drive, and an expansion of more concentric pedestrian paths, ultimately encouraging a visual unification of campus’ central zones in line with Downing’s vision. Interestingly, this contemporary conceptualization of pedestrian pathways incorporates visual circuitry in a similar fashion to Renwick’s original plan.

As elaborated upon by Downing in *Cottage Residences*, the presiding principles of a Beautiful landscape include Unity, Uniformity, Symmetry, and a kind of formality that reveals “the design of men” in contrast to a more natural, picturesque composition which “hides the hand of man to achieve greater expressiveness.”⁷² Within the original vision for the axial design of Main building and its landscape lies such a notion of the Beautiful. However, the emphasis on circulation and vehicular accessibility in later iterations of the central design of campus subverted topographic symmetry and most importantly, *unity*. Although the formal logic of Main’s landscape

⁷¹ *Vassar College Landscape Master Plan* (New York, NY: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, 2011), 17.

⁷² Kenneth Hafertepe and James F O’Gorman, *American Architects and Their Books* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 8.

design seems in stark juxtaposition to the rugged, irregular, Picturesque natural of the wider campus' design, this initial counterbalance creating a stylistic dialogue rather than a disjuncture in the landscape. Like a quilt, this patchwork of varied ideologies and visual vistas was sewn together by the eyes of the individual walking through each node. However, the presence of the car circulating throughout has led to a kind of noisiness, both visually and auditorily, that creates abrupt severances in the coherent experience of the Vassar campus landscape. Though questions regarding functional accessibility to buildings remains, Vassar would do well to consider alternatives, such as a decentralization of administrative facilities and re-prioritization of service oriented roads, to the network of roadways and parking spots that splice central campus, isolating landscape nodes that should otherwise maintain the dynamic patchwork of green that is Vassar College.

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS.

On October 19th, 2019, The Board of Trustees at Vassar College unanimously moved to support a \$13 million dollar climate action plan, delivering major building renovations and upgrades to the campus heating system in an effort to push the college one step closer to its 2030 carbon neutral goal.⁷³ This plan, including an LED retrofitting of campus, upgrades to the central boiler system and to heating systems in Chicago Hall as well as other buildings on campus, largely stems from a net zero study conducted by Ecosystem Energy Services, published August 1st, 2019.⁷⁴ The findings of this report included various scenarios in which Vassar could accomplish carbon neutrality through energy system retrofits, such as heat recovery heat pumps, ground source heat pumps, and solar thermal heating.⁷⁵ This technocratic approach to sustainability succeeds as a response to climate change; the warming of the earth's atmosphere is caused by greenhouse gases, thus the most practical solution is to rid ourselves of these emissions. Yet, this insular treatment of sustainable design does little to inform the ways in which we as humans- and designers- interact with and perceive the environment.

Environmental philosopher, Randall Teal, states: "sustainable architecture succeeds when it helps to facilitate, structure, and affirm the processes of place and

⁷³ Larry Hertz, "Vassar Trustees Endorse \$13- million Plan to Move College toward Carbon Neutrality," Vassar College, October 21, 2019, <https://stories.vassar.edu/2019/191021-vassar-trustees-endorse-13-million-plan-to-move-college-toward-carbon-neutrality.html>.

⁷⁴ Ecosystem Energy Services, *Vassar College: Net Zero Study Final Report*, August 1, 2019.

⁷⁵ Ecosystem Energy Services, *Vassar College: Net Zero Study Final Report*, 11.

the processes of life.”⁷⁶ Note Teal’s choice of word: *place* rather than *space*. The delineation of place, in contrast to space, is one long disputed in the field of urban theory; however, in most schools of thought, place implies a certain level of subjectivity. Whereas space is a void, an abstraction; place brims with perception, relation, and ideology. As seen in the fragmentary evolution of Vassar campus, landscape, whether or not it is “a natural condition or a constructed ecology,”⁷⁷ acts as a geographic framework for the collective imagination (consider as well the epistemology of the word ‘landscape,’ from the Old English *landskip*, referring not to the land itself but an *image* of it⁷⁸). The transformation of the *place* that is Vassar College has long coincided with changing cultural imaginations; from the planting of perennials in the Flower Circle and differing tree types in honor of graduating classes to the conflict over vehicular circulation around Main and the ultimate desire to preserve the picturesque nature of campus, Vassar’s landscape has held in its manicured lawns and ambling vistas the heterogenous attempt to understand our relationship to the environment.

In a sense, Matthew Vassar’s belief that the college campus should some how exist in conversation with the surrounding landscape set the tone for contemporary discussions of sustainability. Though landscape preservation and sustainable adaptation seem to be at odds, the very nature and intention of Vassar’s landscaped history *encourages* change and evolution. For in fusing formal garden design with

⁷⁶ Ibid, 64-65.

⁷⁷ Michelle Laboy, “Landscape as a Conceptual Space for Architecture: Shifting Theories and Critical Practices,” *The Plan Journal* 0, no. 0: 2016, 81.

⁷⁸ James Corner, *Recovering Landscape: essays in contemporary landscape architecture*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 153.

the more informal picturesque, in grooming some parts of campus while leaving others to the ebb and flow of the natural geography, Vassar has defined its *place* as a patchwork of green, with the only consistency being change. In effect, by once more redefining and re-imagining Vassar's landscape through the lens of sustainability, we uphold the foundational integrity of processes of inhabitation and life at Vassar College.

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