

# Assessment Strategies for Canada's Historic Sites

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Planning for treatment can be reactive—born out of a crisis—or it can be strategic—developed with the understanding that the short and long term care of historic fabric, on recognition, on the willingness to protect, on timely and appropriate intervention, and not least of all on the availability of resources, human, financial or otherwise. Generally speaking, strategic planning should result in an accepted definition of long-term objectives so that daily decisions build upon one another and are compatible with the aims set for the site. Whether expressed in a report, developed in a formal master plan, or simply understood by owner, managers, designers, maintenance staff and others involved, it is critical that an understanding of the make-up of the heritage character of the site and of long-term objectives be shared between all who influence site conservation and development.<sup>1</sup>

Strategic planning depends to some degree on processes of a macro scale whereby landscapes of similar types are compared in order to assess their degree of significance. The Canadian Historic Sites and Monuments Boards, for example, evaluates the national historic significance of historic landscapes.<sup>2</sup> The English Register of Historic Parks and Gardens also places in three ascending categories of importance parks, gardens and landscapes. Criteria associated with historical and aesthetic importance have traditionally influenced the assessments of designed landscapes;<sup>3</sup> however, there is a growing movement toward examining their value(s) from a broader cultural perspective. In hand with this phenomenon is an increase of awareness of other types of cultural landscapes such as those which result from gradual evolutionary processes—settlement, for example—and such as those who have associative values by virtue of the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element.<sup>4</sup> In these cases historical and aesthetic

criteria may have a lesser or different influence in the overall assessment of cultural value.

Macro evaluation helps to identify sites of greater significance, and to rank those of lesser significance accordingly; ultimately, it provides the means to recognition and a tool for the decision-making process associated with the allocation of resources. In principle, sites of the greatest significance should become the objects of greater recognition and of the most rigorous protection and care. In practice, this is unfortunately not always the case.

In the name of progress, of necessity, of evolution and sometimes in the name of art, a number of historic landscapes are forced into submission—forced out of a hundred or more years of continuity, into unjustified, disconnected change. This phenomenon is particularly damaging when it occurs in association with landscapes that have a very high cultural value or which possess some unique character.

Pressures of change constantly challenge historic landscapes to justify their importance and their level of protection. Given the momentum in growth of public concern for environmental quality and sustainable development, we can hope that it is only a question of time before the onus is placed on change to demonstrate its necessity.

The thinking about historic landscapes has already dramatically increased in sophistication in recent years; however, in some ways it remains archaic. Today, anyone dreaming of threatening the beautiful neo-gothic elevation of the east block of Parliament Hill with a picture window would soon meet with ardent criticism but so-called landscape "improvements" are carried out without much remonstrance. This happens because there is a lack of appreciation of the short- and long-term consequences of seemingly innocuous interventions of the heritage character and authentic fabrics of a historic landscape. Lawns illustrate this well as they seem to be particularly vulnerable to the inclinations of those who cannot look at a piece of lawn without wanting to put something in it—statues, sculptures, fountains and flower gardens being favourite offenders.

Macro-evaluation may be a useful mechanism to identify and compare significant historic landscapes, but it has limited application thereafter as far as site specific conservation strategies are concerned. Clearly other tools are required to make site-specific decisions in an informed and thoughtful manner. It is one thing to recognize that a landscape is historically or culturally important; it is quite another to identify what is important about it, what is the tangible evidence that



Fig. 1. Rideau Hall, a Canadian National Historic Site, September, 1918. Courtesy Public Archives of Canada.

demonstrates its importance, how that surviving evidence should be handled, how severely eroded or damaged parts should be treated, what functions are appropriate to that site, and how those functions should be integrated without compromising the integrity of the site. Strategic planning on a micro scale studies site specific questions in order to develop a holistic approach and a realistic implementation strategy, i.e., a plan for treatment.

Planning for treatment involves a process consisting primarily of the following steps:

- Information-gathering directed at presenting comprehensive information on the historical development of the site. This is generally achieved through historical research, field archaeology, and on-site investigation. Detailed plant inventories are useful if not essential adjuncts to this process (i.e., the dating of trees to document major phases and patterns in the evolution of the tree cover).
- Information-gathering directed at identifying existing and potential functional needs and user requirements. This may include ceremonial functions, night use, universal access, security, circulation, interpretation, and visitation.
- Information-deciphering aimed at identifying (if possible), the key periods of development of the site, the characteristics of the layout, and fabric of those periods.
- An identification of the individual areas, parts, elements, and fabric of a site which have an association with key periods of historical development and which contribute to its historical/cultural value.
- An overall assessment of the historic and aesthetic quality of the landscape in question with identification of existing areas of functional conflicts, visual and functional spatial relationships, visual decay including the sensory impacts of the outside context on the site, neglect, deterioration of abuse.
- A general assessment of the condition of individual areas or zones which make up the property, outlining assets and defects, conservation opportunities and constraints.
- A detailed assessment of the elements and fabric from a conservation perspective. This includes an assessment of the quality and make-up of the existing planting, paving materials, circulation, enclosures, water features, structures, and of all other historic elements (i.e., lighting, objects, furnishings).

This assessment should also describe and take into account the impact of contemporary functions and user requirements on the fabric and appearance of historical resources and on their conservation potential.

Detailed assessment is perhaps best developed in a report as a clear three-set process: (1) a description of the historic precedents for any given feature; (2) a description of the contemporary existing conditions; and (3) a statement of the conservation potential.

- An assessment of the ability of the site to meet its existing and potential functional needs and user requirements, (i.e., universal accessibility, special events, and visitation).
- Broad recommendations addressing the land use of each particular zone contained within a site.

- Specific recommendations addressing the quality of each distinct zone from a historic, aesthetic and functional perspective.
- Specific recommendations addressing the visual and functional relationships between spaces.
- Specific recommendations addressing the quality of hard and soft fabrics from a historic, artistic and functional perspective.
- Specific indications of the high, medium and low priorities including the need for additional studies, and of the urgency of the prescribed conservation treatments.
- General cost estimates of the human and financial resources associated with the carrying out recommendations.

**Assessments and recommendations should at all times be directed by the knowledge of historical design and artistic intent(s).**

To be useful, the results of the comprehensive study described above need to be synthesized into a management plan and/or master plan where agreed upon recommendations are translated into short- and long-term objectives that are clearly outlined. The master plan should then be ratified and distributed by the approving authority in order to ensure that it provides direction to all parties concerned in future deliberations and interventions. Periodic reviews and discussions are then useful to address new requirements, and lacunas and misunderstandings in the interpretation of prescribed treatments including routine maintenance.

It is good to remind ourselves that planning for treatment is not an end in itself but a means by which informed decisions can be reached. Conservation plans for historic landscapes have sometimes been wrongly upheld as mechanisms to freeze landscapes, which is, in any event, a ludicrous concept since landscapes by their very nature are in a constant state of change. A plan for treatment should always focus on the ideas which these designed landscapes express, and where sufficiently significant, these ideas should be understood, respected, interpreted and re-expressed. Ideas, contentious or not, are, after all, eternal and in the end are perhaps the only reality.<sup>5</sup> Taken in the proper context, planning for treatment provides a mechanism to guide appropriate and timely cyclical renewal. However, in the final analysis, a plan for treatment is only as successful as it is understood and the will to implement it is strong.

The recent proposal to introduce an elaborate contemporary rose garden in the classified grounds of Rideau Hall, a Canadian national historic site, has not been without controversy (figure 1). It provides a useful example to examine some of the thorny issues associated with the integration of new proposals into authentic historic grounds. The new intervention consists of paved footpaths, a water feature, sculptural elements and rose beds placed at arm's length of (not to say within) the well preserved picturesque wooded entrance park and open parkland.

The location of the new rose garden within the grounds has been contentious because the site enjoys five distinct historic zones, four of which are in a good state

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of repair from a historical and conservation perspective. In a nutshell, the areas are the wooded entrance park (figure 2), the open parkland, the sugar bush, the ornamental flower gardens, and the former farmland/administrative



Fig. 2. The wooded entrance park represents 130 years of continuous management. View post-1882. Courtesy Public Archives of Canada.

area, the latter being in the least satisfactory condition. Of these areas the wooded entrance park has been planted and groomed consistently for 130 years as an English picturesque wooded park characterized principally by graceful trees, lawn and elegant drives.

On one hand, it has been held by the proponents of the intervention that it is sensitive and adds a new layer to the site and will provide enjoyment. On the other hand, it has been advocated that this new layer is inappropriate from a conservation perspective principally because of the selected location. That opinion is substantiated by the following reasoning:



Fig. 3. The Fountain of Hope at Rideau Hall. Photo by the author.

- The heritage character of the wooded entrance park is defined by a simple elegance; the ornamental characteristic of a rose garden will upset the heritage character of the wooded entrance park by introducing elements which are a clear departure from the simple elegance of trees and lawn.
- Another area of the site, namely the ornamental flower gardens, already serves an ornamental voca-

tion ideal for a rose garden; furthermore, the ornamental flower gardens have been transformed on numerous occasions, and would benefit from stronger definition. Were this project to be implemented in this area, it would provide a welcome opportunity to strengthen the character of the flower gardens, and introduce a welcome legacy.

- The character nor the fabric of the wooded entrance park is accidental; it is the result of the deliberate and consistent application of design intent as revealed by historical research going back to 1865 when Lord Monck requested that 400 trees be planted in front of Rideau Hall, to 1867 when another 195 trees were introduced, to 1900 when Lork Minto directed a number of improvements namely thinning and trimming, to 1905 when Lady Grey embellished the wooded entrance park with a naturalized planting of bulbs, and so on.
- In the broader context, surviving authentic English picturesque estates of such integrity are few in Canada and, therefore, their intrinsic qualities should be preserved for the edification and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Situations like the ones at Rideau Hall give considerable cause for thought. Years ago Catherine Howett, in a study of reconstruction and conservation intervention suggested that none would ever dream of putting the arms back on the Venus of Melos<sup>6</sup>, and so questioned to a degree the merit of reconstructions in the context of historic gardens. That analogy is extremely useful in the context of this discussion. Taken from another perspective, why would anyone modify the drapes of her robe when they are so exquisitely carved? Yet, with historic gardens this happens frequently.

And so the pendulum swings back and forth between the restorer who wants to take the historic landscape back in time and the modernist who wants to give it a new face. Indeed there are cases where either of those approaches may be appropriate. In the case of the designed landscapes which have somehow miraculously come to us in good condition, should we not think hard and twice before interrupting the continuity of the time scale.

<sup>1</sup> Sales J., *Country Life*, February 1983. "Clear objectives required" pp. 452-453.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart J. and Susan Bugey, *APT Bulletin*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1975 A case for the commemoration of historic landscapes and gardens pp. 99-123.

<sup>3</sup> Fardin L., "The conservation of urban parks of aesthetic and historic interest" MA thesis for the University of York, UK, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> ICOMOS Landscapes Working Group Newsletter, January 1993, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> H.F. Clark, *Garden History Society Occasional Paper No. 1*, 1969, The restoration and reclamation of gardens pp 3-6.

<sup>6</sup> Howett, C. "Second Thoughts," *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 77, July-August 1987, pp. 52-55.

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