

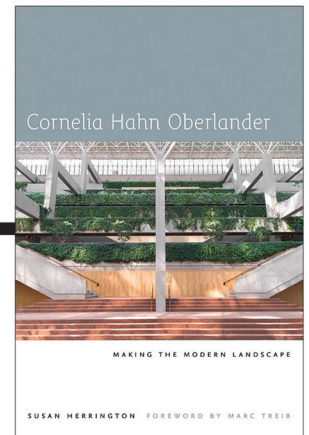
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A POET AND
PRAGMATISTCORNELIA HAHN OBERLANDER:
MAKING THE MODERN LANDSCAPE

BY SUSAN HERRINGTON; CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA:
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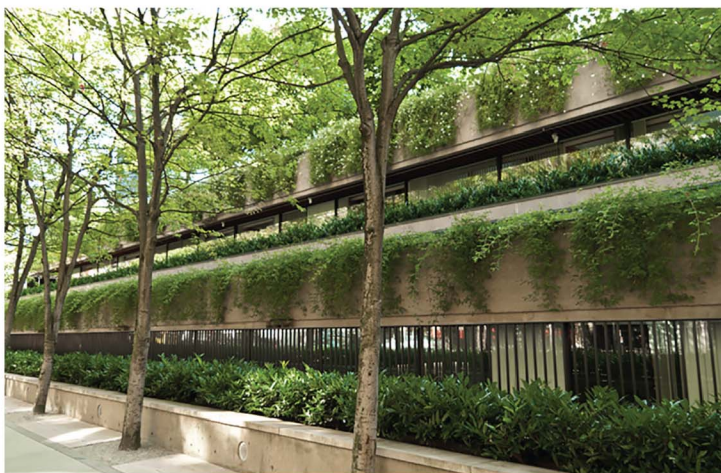


Having received the Order of Canada in 1990, an honor similar to knighthood in Britain, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander is the closest thing to royalty in the profession of landscape architecture today. I recently had the chance to hear her speak and was nervously excited to see how Oberlander, the person, matched the reputation. I could barely see her from my seat in the back of the cavernous auditorium at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, where she had designed the landscape for Moshe Safdie's glass and concrete edifice, but her voice was arresting. At one point, she gestured at a slide of one of her early playground designs. "That child wants to explore," she insisted in a gravelly German accent.

Oberlander, who is now 93, has dedicated a large part of her career to designing the sort of creativity-stimulating playgrounds that make insurance agents squirm—with jungle gyms made of actual tree trunks and standing water to play in. Her installation for the Children's Creative Centre at Expo 67 in Montreal launched her as a leading thinker in playground design, as well as in modernism, the predominant design vocabulary of the day. She helped pioneer the design of North America's first green roofs in the 1970s and pushed the concepts of school gardens and horticultural therapy decades before they became fashionably urgent responses to the obesity epidemic, neighborhood violence, drug addiction, and other ills of the city.

As she made clear in her lecture, however, Oberlander is less interested in any one design philosophy or specialization in landscape architecture than in the contours of each piece of land and each community where her work takes place. Above all else, she has asserted the primacy of design as a social and environmental determinant throughout her career, consciously addressing the psychosocial maladies of poverty, the disconnection of modern society from the environment, and the degradation of urban ecosystems through her work.

Earlier this year, the University of Virginia Press released *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: Making the Modern Landscape* by Susan Herrington, a professor of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Its 272 pages are intended both as a biography of Oberlander's formative experiences and professional accomplishments and as a parallel history of landscape architecture theory as it has unfolded over the 65 years of Oberlander's practice. Herrington poses Oberlander's career as an analog for modern landscape architecture in its evolution away from the traditional norms of garden design and picturesque notions of urbanism and toward an alliance with the modernist architects who have molded urban form since the late 1940s.

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Herrington's assertion about Oberlander's influence on the practice of landscape architecture is well substantiated by her book. However, Herrington, in the book's introduction, acknowledges that modernism makes an awkward lens for viewing Oberlander's life work or for describing the practice of landscape architecture in the mid to late 20th century: "A term that I have wrestled with in writing this book is 'modern landscape architecture.' Given that we are in the second decade of the twenty-first century, can Oberlander still be called a modern landscape architect?" Herrington goes on to say that because of "Oberlander's belief in the social efficacy of landscape architecture and her use of abstraction," she has "chosen to call her work modern," noting that Oberlander herself "maintains that...she has never been 'kissed by postmodernism.'" Having established this backdrop for her own academic discourse on historic and contemporary design theory, Herrington proceeds to tell the life story of Oberlander, born in Germany, educated at Harvard, based in Vancouver.

Herrington's academic discourse will be of interest to architectural historians; designers are likely to find the window into Oberlander's life and career more enthralling. Oberlander grew up in Weimar-era Germany during a brief explosion of cultural innovation and technological genius between the end of the First World War and the rise of Hitler, a period that produced the likes of Albert Einstein, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Her parents were Jewish intellectuals immersed in the culture of 1920s Berlin, "attend[ing] dance performances at the Bauhaus," Herrington writes, and "actively participat[ing] in this effervescent period of art and design."

Thus Oberlander was exposed to the notion that "an enlightened life was a modern one" at a formative age. Early on, in the first chapter, Herrington brings to life events that make Oberlander seem almost fated to a life as a prominent landscape architect. The story is filled with rich details that make a satisfying overture to the book. She describes Oberlander's memories of playing at her best friend's house in Berlin, for example, which was designed by Erich Mendelsohn, another prominent architect of the Weimar era, and notes how the young Cornelia Hahn was impressed with its "integration of landscape and architecture."

Oberlander's father was an engineer trained in the United States by the industrial psychologist and engineer Lillian Moller Gilbreth, who received her PhD in 1915, five years before women's suffrage in America. Gilbreth contributed greatly to the respect of women in the workplace and was revered by feminists but distanced herself from feminism, as did Oberlander as she navigated the male-dominated world of design early in her career. Herrington tells how Gilbreth became a close family friend, helping the Hahns relocate to America in 1939, just as the Nazi persecution of Jews was accelerating. Shortly thereafter, she brought Oberlander to Smith College, where she would receive her bachelor's degree in architecture and landscape architecture.

Herrington intertwines the story of Oberlander's adolescence and education with condensed interpretations of the broader cultural forces and the way that these shaped Oberlander in her chosen profession. In describing the potent wave of young Jewish immigrants from Germany in the 1930s, who responded to the trauma by transforming the world for the better as adults, Herrington writes that people like Henry Kissinger, Ruth Westheimer, and Oberlander "were old enough to feel the gravity of their family's situation but young enough to adapt and survive in their new countries. Although they felt the raw sense of loss when they fled their homeland, scores still remember happy childhoods when Germany was a culturally rich, democratic society."

Among the more poignant passages of the book are those that describe the role of Oberlander's mother in shaping her destiny as a landscape architect. Beate Hahn was a professional

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Alternating plantings on the building facade at Robson Square and the Provincial Law Courts in Vancouver.

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horticulturist, but the content of her gardening books for children is even more telling as an influence on her daughter. Hahn's books were for teaching science in the garden, but they also had philosophical underpinnings related to the German word *kindergarten* (literally, children's garden). As an approach to early childhood education and socialization, the original kindergartens encouraged creativity and learning in an experiential and holistic manner through lightly structured lessons in natural settings, including gardens. At the age of 15, Oberlander was illustrating her mother's books with graphically and conceptually complex renderings, portraying the utopic conditions possible in a society that used nature as a context for education.

Through Oberlander's life, Herrington follows the theoretical foundations of her designs and the way they were carved by both her predecessors and her contemporaries in the field, though as Oberlander's career progressed, Herrington argues that she increasingly did the carving. The translation of modernist architecture to the landscape, community-based planning, and ecological design all solidified in the profession during the first decades of her career. Oberlander borrowed their principles when she saw a fit in her projects, but she developed a reputation as a pragmatist with bold ideas and the audacity to make them happen.

Herrington writes, "Oberlander is not just the mortar between two bricks—Lawrence Halprin and Ian McHarg, for example. Rather her work change[d] the contours of the foundation upon

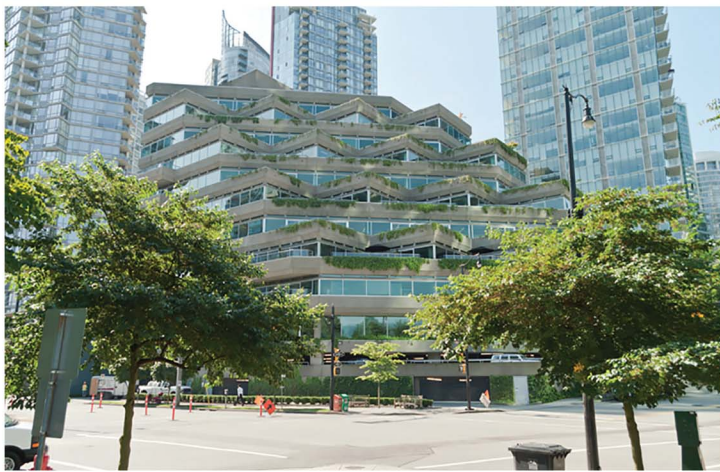
which subsequent designers have built their careers." She was classmates with Halprin and McHarg at Harvard and then worked for Dan Kiley, Louis Kahn, and Oscar Stonorov. She later collaborated with Arthur Erickson and Moshe Safdie after moving to Canada when her husband, Peter Oberlander, who would become a founding figure of urban planning in Canada, was offered a job there in 1953.

Oberlander earned numerous commissions on high-profile building projects, including Robson Square in Vancouver (1973), the National Gallery in Ottawa (1983), the Canadian embassies in Washington, D.C. (1968), and Berlin (1999), the New York Times Building in Manhattan (2001), and the VanDusen Botanical Garden Visitor Center, also in Vancouver (2010). What these and many other of her projects have in common is an intricate interrelationship with the nonnatural built environment. She may be known as a pioneer of green roof design, but more accurate is to understand her as a master of relating landscape to structure. "The contemporary architect is often reluctant to associate himself with a landscape architect, for he can rarely find one who can speak his language aesthetically," said Oberlander in 1955.

Making the Modern Landscape brings Oberlander's story to life with rich narrative in the initial chapters and then plateaus in a case study format as Herrington chronicles Oberlander's major design projects, one by one. Herrington leaves us hungry for more of her biographical intent. It is primarily her voice as an academic that comes through rather than Oberlander's voice. There are occasional insights into the person behind the work ("Oberlander quickly learned that as a wife of a public official in Ottawa 'one was not expected to work.'"), but the history outweighs the biography in the latter half of the book. Whereas most biographers would flesh out their story with numerous accounts from those closest to the subject, such as their spouse, children, and other close family and friends, for the most part Herrington limits us to understanding Oberlander's professional relationships. But perhaps it is Oberlander herself who wants us to know her more for the meaning in her work rather than the life events that shaped it. This certainly seems true of her adolescence in Nazi Germany, of which Oberlander, at the age of 20, wrote, "I've made up my mind to adjust myself, discard sentiments, and look into the future."

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Cornelia Hahn Oberlander with the architect Arthur Erickson.

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Oberlander is known for what Herrington calls a “poetic pragmatism” to find the best and simplest solution to every design problem, and if city code didn’t allow it or a fellow designer didn’t like it—or even if it made a client uncomfortable—she would persist. She usually won, even if it took decades, as in the case of the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, where she was commissioned to design the landscape in 1975. The building was designed as a modernist homage to the indigenous peoples of British Columbia’s Pacific Coast, as the museum was intended to house a collection of their artifacts. Among other features, Oberlander’s plans called for a forest walk of ethnobotanical species and a clay-lined reflecting pool, both of which were nixed for a combination of safety and political reasons. It took her more than three decades of persuasion—and a shift in cultural attitudes—but the plantings and pool were finally completed in 2010. Herrington quotes Arthur Erickson, one of Canada’s most famous architects, with whom Oberlander collaborated prolifically, as saying that “no one could strike the fear of God into a contractor like Cornelia.”

The book reveals how Oberlander’s determination comes from a sense of how a landscape will affect people ecologically, socially, and psychologically, in a private yard or a national institution. Herrington’s analysis of the designs Oberlander developed to these ends is among the most compelling aspects of the book. Each design case study has a “reception” section in which Herrington describes the way the project was received by the public and how it measured up to intent. Herrington explores her designs to show the links between landscape form

and consequence. Though clearly an admirer, Herrington manages to retain a critic’s perspective, pointing out not just Oberlander’s highly lauded successes but also instances in which her design intent is unfulfilled.

Herrington distills several design moves that have emerged over time as Oberlander’s signatures, if not indeed styles, as style is often wed to pretense, which is absent in her work. One example of a form that Oberlander has repeated is a prominent circular space intended for gathering, whether a sandbox, playing field, family patio, or community green. These circular meeting places were often made with a low concrete wall, sized for sitting. Not exactly jaw-dropping design, but Oberlander was rarely seeking that emotion—unless she saw it as fitting the purpose of the site. On the roof of the VanDusen Botanical Garden Visitor Center she, together with the architects, Busby, Perkins + Will, designed in the image of a native orchid. “...At the Visitor Center, the living algorithms of a plant found in the regional landscape guided the architectural form of the roof, providing an elegant interplay between external appearances and internal structure,” writes Herrington. The goal of the client was to inspire visitors about the role plants play in our lives, making a dramatic biomimicry approach appropriate.

Most of Oberlander’s work lacks such explicit references: Another theme that Herrington draws out is Oberlander’s skill at making her efforts invisible in the landscape, referencing Sir Jeffrey Jellicoe’s notion of “sublimating” design by “inserting within it an invisible idea that only the subconscious could comprehend.” She incorporated this form of communication in a variety of ways, often with a social or psychological purpose. At the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly building in Yellowknife, however, she transposed the idea to the ecological realm, using a technique she calls “invisible mending.” “Plants were not installed in defined planting beds, but instead interspersed in disturbed areas and bare patches—an approach that made the planting process invisible but the result highly effective,” Herrington writes.

When she received the commission for the project in the late 1980s, she became one of the first, and likely still one of the few, landscape architects to work in northern Canada. The

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The Evergreen Building in Vancouver.

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chosen location for the assembly building was on the outskirts of the city (population 15,000 at the time) on a parcel that was essentially still wilderness. Her design solution was to put the ecosystem back together after the construction was complete. Entire patches of peat bog, including the native plant assemblages growing on them, were lifted with earth-moving equipment and later repositioned like giant “plugs” that quickly knitted themselves back together to create landscape that differed little from the predevelopment wilderness.

After hearing Oberlander speak of her seven decades of work in the landscapes of North America, I would add to Herrington’s “poetic pragmatism” that she also has a gardener’s or a land manager’s pragmatism, a counterbalance to the heavy conceptualism of many of her contemporaries. At the end of her lecture, Oberlander announced that she would be making a site visit at 2:30 to instruct grounds personnel on how to properly prune the intentionally crooked pines she had procured for the garden. “You are all invited,” she bellowed.

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The rooftop garden at Library Square in Vancouver.

The entryway landscape of the gallery is known as the Taiga Garden after the Russian word for boreal forest, an ecotype that dominates 60 percent of Canada’s landmass. Underlying much of the nation’s boreal forests is the Canadian Shield, an area of semiexposed pre-Cambrian bedrock as large as the continental United States, which Oberlander chose to replicate using fragments of bedrock excavated during the gallery’s construction. The resulting landscape is not exactly an example of an “invisible touch” approach to design—the Taiga Garden is widely publicized as an homage to a particularly famous painting by A. Y. Jackson held in the gallery’s collection—yet there is a strongly “sublimated” message in its presence.

The gnarled pines of the Taiga Garden preside over a number of homely shrubs and drifts of meadow that look as if they could be intentional (they are) or could be weeds. Most of the landscape is rock. One wonders if the throngs of tourists notice the garden at all. If they do, they’re apt to think it is some unfinished part of the landscape or perhaps a construction zone. But what’s interesting about the Taiga Garden is that, other than the Ottawa River churning below it, it’s the only thing in sight that appears untamed. This is ground zero of the National Capital Region, Canada’s equivalent of the District of Columbia, where every shrub is sheared, every flower bed is in full bloom, and the streets seem to be swept daily. The parliament buildings are across the way, and statues of Canada’s founding fathers are within eyeshot. Yet, beautifully, subtly, simply, here is a bit of Canadian wilderness inside its political core. The painting it pays homage to is, fittingly, called *Terre Sauvage*—wild earth. ●

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