

The Landscape Legacy of Dan Kiley

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Introduction

Daniel Urban Kiley was a prominent landscape architect of the 20th Century. He was born in Boston in 1912, and died in 2004, and worked in the discipline from the 1930s nearly to his death. However, his most prominent work was mid-century. Kiley's legacy is that he is one of the most influential landscape architects of the 20th century. That warrants exploration, and I do so here.

I investigated Kiley and his impact on landscape architecture and our lives in the context of evolution of the field, his personal life, and a review of some of his works. For myself, I wanted to learn more about the landscape architecture, something I know little about in a formal sense.

My investigative approach, for better or worse, was to rely heavily on the internet and Google, which I refer to as the Oracle. A resource that I recommend from that exploration is The Cultural Landscape Foundation's "The Landscape Legacy of Dan Kiley" website, which you can find simply by entering that phrase into a browser. I found myself returning to it time and again. It is a great resource for all things historical in American landscape architecture.

Julie Donnell loaned me "Dan Kiley: The Complete Works of America's Master Landscape Architect." I found that to be an absolutely wonderful resource. It was written by Kiley and Jane Amidon. Upon digging into the book, I also found myself much more appreciative of the smaller details of Kiley's designs. Amidon is by the way no slouch either, currently professor and director of the Urban Landscape Program at Northeastern University.

Personal Life

Dan Kiley's early years were rooted in the vicinity of Boston Massachusetts. Though he described himself as "poor," he seemed to have a pretty good life with hints of landscape architect evident early on. His own reflections of what inspired him, taken from his book, begin to paint the picture of what is coming. Foreshadowing future architectural thinking, Kiley writes in his book, "I grew up running around the tight alleyways in labyrinthine fenced yards that surrounded my house; the dense layering of these architectural spaces - all connected, each leading to another and another - formed the foundation of my later understanding of structural interplay and spatial relationships."

He also spent a lot of time at his grandmother's farm. "As a child, I spent many summers exploring the Piney Woods, chasing my sisters across open fields, clambering over old stone walls to find fern-filled shade by cold brooks. I was drawn to the richness of the rural landscape and fascinated by the force of its purity: one thousand sugar-maple trunks on a leaf-strewn slope; a rippling twenty-acre blanket of ripe, golden hay that reversed in winter to reveal a brilliant snow-field with just two ski tracks breaking its still surface...It was at my grandmother's that I first felt infinity."

While in high school, he caddied at the local country club and "fell in love with the vast sculptural quality of the fairways, with a morning mist rising off their smooth, green expanses." From there he began to explore golf course design, plants, and combinations of green. His aspirations began to crystallize.

After high school, he wrote to all of the local landscape architects and planners around Boston in the hopes of landing some sort of opportunity. He succeeded with Warren Manning, one of the founders of the American Society of Landscape Architects. He worked with Manning over the next several years, first as a volunteer and eventually as an associate.

Against Manning's advice, Kiley began to attend the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University in 1936. At the same time, he continued to work for Manning. Harvard was not a good fit for Kiley, and along with two classmates Garrett Eckbo and Jim Rose, he began to deviate from the program. The three did not concur with many of the dry teachings of their instructors, and wished to incorporate new materials into their designs such as aluminum, plastic, and steel-reinforced concrete. Kiley left Harvard in 1938, and shortly thereafter the three rebels published a series of articles in *Pencil Points* that represented a "design manifesto" for their future in landscape architecture.

He worked for a little while for the National Park Service, then the Public Housing Authority and United States Housing Authority, during which time he became friends with Louis Kahn and adopted elements of his design style. Kahn may be familiar to you because he was the architect for what was the Fort Wayne Performing Arts Center. His proposal was an order of magnitude greater than the budget allowed, so they did have to scale back a bit for the final product. They also collaborated at Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, and the Phillips Exeter Academy Library in Exeter, New Hampshire. Kiley also met Eero Saarinen in this period. He ultimately collaborated with Saarinen on numerous projects, so more on that later.

In 1942 he opened his own office in Franconia New Hampshire, and married Anne Lathrop

Sturges, with whom he had eight children, and stayed with for his entire life. She and the family often traveled with Kiley to live near his projects.

He served in the US Army over the end of World War II, which availed him “the opportunity to travel around Western Europe and, for the first time in my life, to experience formal, spatial built landscapes (as championed in France by André Le Nôtre at its grandest, most rarefied level, yet found on every street of tiny towns and cities). THIS was what I had been searching for – a language ... to reveal nature’s power and create spaces of structural integrity. I suddenly saw that lines, allées and orchards/bosques of trees, tapis verts and clipped hedges, canals, pools and fountains could be tools to build landscapes of clarity and infinity, just like a walk in the woods.”

During that time, the not landscape architect architect Kiley oversaw the reconstruction of the bombed-out **Palace of Justice** in Nuremberg, a project he is well-known for. He then returned to Franconia with a variety of architectural lessons that served him throughout his career.

A Sample of Famous Works

Kiley was involved in over 1000 projects, and we can only visit a few of them. I present my examples with the approach of looking furthest afield first, then zeroing in on the bull’s eye of Fort Wayne, given that Kiley did a variety of works within Indiana and also at Concordia Seminary here in town. Along the way, I will share the patterns that I observed, the elements that I found particularly attractive or perhaps that I did not. Where opportunity provides, I digress into other topics, as is my habit.

Expansive Projects

Projects of grander scale the **L'Esplanade du Général de Gaulle** in Paris. Kiley’s piece was a pedestrian concourse, perhaps half a mile long. This expansive walkway expresses many of Kiley’s favorite elements: the concourse itself, perhaps too large to be called an allee, repeating geometry, concrete, and symmetrical, repeating plantings of shrubs and trees.

In the United States, an expansive project was **Kiley Garden** in Tampa, associated with corporate offices for NationsBank. Harry Wolf, architect of the building, Rivergate Tower, based his design in part on the Fibonacci series, where, beginning with zero and one, each number in the sequence is the sum of the previous two numbers, 0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21...etc. This pattern is a common one in nature, observed most obviously in pine cones, many succulents, and mollusks like the nautilus. Wolf suggested Kiley incorporate the same strategy into the design for the

adjacent park. Kiley responded with a massive grid of concrete and grass that makes obvious one of the recurring elements of his designs.

Another grand design was **Cudahy Gardens** in Milwaukee. This project was associated with Eero Saarinen, one of the architects on a set of buildings including the Milwaukee Museum of Art. The landscaping provides a counterpoint to the extravagant museum, and a connection to Lake Michigan. Hedgerows divide the landscape into quadrants. Particularly striking to me are the 2000 fountains forming the spine of the space.

Another prominent work for Kiley was the landscaping for **Jefferson National Expansion Memorial** in St. Louis, Missouri). Kiley designed the landscape surrounding the Gateway Arch, creating a grand and monumental space. This was another collaboration with Saarinen, who designed the arch.

The Softer Side

While I appreciate the expansive grids of repeating geometric designs in many of Kiley's works, more appealing to me are Kiley's softer designs, particularly those that have lots of water features. **Fountain Palace** in Dallas and the **Ford Foundation Atrium** in Manhattan are good examples of that. The geometry is still there, but the landscapes are lush and verdant.

Along those lines, a landscape that I appreciated, and may have even walked through, is **Patterns** at a du Pont residence in Wilmington. It is not clear where these gardens are located, but I have walked through Winterthur, a du Pont estate, and elements of that landscape have this appearance, and Kiley was one of the many landscape architects at that property.

Indiana

In Indiana, Kiley did a variety of projects, especially in Columbus. Perhaps the most well-known is the **Miller House Garden**. The Miller House itself was again designed by Eero Saarinen, and is a classic example of mid-century modern architecture. Kiley's Landscaping design, including precisely planted grids of flowers, rows of trees and allees, does a wonderful job connecting the grounds and home together. A similar design is seen with **Hamilton Garden**, also in Columbus.

Last but not least, an important work of Kiley for us is **Concordia Theological Seminary**. Kiley's design was part of a larger campus vision to create a serene, contemplative environment for students and faculty, in keeping with the seminary's mission of theological study and spiritual reflection.

Conclusions

Dan Urban Kiley was indeed a transformational force in American landscape architecture. Quoting Peter Walker, “The legacy of Dan Kiley is that his work demonstrates how place informs life and how in turn life gives meaning and value to place. That he has done with art, Grace and good humor to the lasting benefit of all.”

Something that surfaced during my review was that things did not always go according to plan. Kiley was removed from the project at the Arch. The trees he used died and were replaced with others that did not match his vision. Elements of Cudahy Gardens have been replaced, and fountains no longer work. Sometimes these changes are from tinkering, other times from degradation over time.

Ultimately, I was most appreciative of Kiley’s ability to connect buildings largely designed by other architects with the surrounding landscape, so that it became less evident where one ended and another began. We can now observe that practice by any number of current landscape architects who have embraced a modern style. That is his legacy.