

Cultural Landscape Thinking:

Traditions and Prospects for Holistic Conservation Practice



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Photos: Prospect Park in Brooklyn

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KB419, Knowles Building, HKU

Randall Mason, PhD, FAAR

Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design (Historic preservation, city & regional planning, landscape architecture)
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Educated in geography, history, and urban planning (PhD Columbia), Mason research addresses preservation, planning, and public space issues. He has worked with the Getty Conservation Institute, the National Park Service, the Rwandan government, and many other organizations. Mason's scholarship includes numerous articles, reports, and books on preservation theory and urban history, including the *The Once and Future New York* (winner of the SAH Antoinette Forrester Downing Award) and several co-authored books for the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), including *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*.

He was a Rome Prize fellow at the American Academy in Rome (2012-13) and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Gothenburg.

Recent teaching and practice work includes: cultural landscape research and planning projects in Washington, DC; a conservation management plan for Miller House & Garden in Columbus, IN; and equitable redevelopment studios in Detroit, Philadelphia, Montgomery, and Selma.

Cultural landscape thinking challenges traditional theories underpinning heritage conservation: by centering the understanding and directing change, as opposed to stopping change (or “arresting decay”); by advancing radically holistic understanding of places (in time, over space, across disciplines), not the partial, fragmented understandings created by individual disciplines; and by adding layers to embrace the dynamism and complexity of landscapes, as opposed to obsessing over loss or defaulting to restoration.

The goal of pivoting toward cultural landscape theory and practice is finding a better balance of contemporary and future functions in heritage and ordinary landscapes alike. Our work, after all, seeks rich cultural experiences for the present moment along with strengthening future ecologies, resources, and experiences for subsequent generations.

Achieving cultural-landscape centered reform of conservation means getting serious about ethnography, community engagement, critical historical methods, and new forms of governance – while squaring the cultural and social functions of landscapes with projections about climate change and hopes for climate adaptation.

This talk outlines basic cultural landscape concepts and frameworks, then proposes several reforms in theory, education, practice, and governance. It is based principally on Western-centered concepts of cultural landscape, sustainability, conservation expertise, and design practice. And it is informed the dozens of professional projects my research team (Urban Heritage Project) has undertaken for the US National Park Service and other institutions.