Heritage in the Landscape
Stewarding and Activating the Landscape of the Farnsworth House

SCOTT MEHAFFEY

In 1945 Chicago physician-scientist Edith Farnsworth commissioned renowned architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to create a weekend getaway approximately 50 miles southwest of Chicago. Ultimately built between 1949 and 1951, the Farnsworth House would become one of the most celebrated works of 20th-century architecture.

Since the Farnsworth House opened as a public site in the mid-1990s, the interpretive focus—and the primary maintenance investment—have been on the iconic house and not its setting. As a result, the relationship between the architecture and the landscape remains largely unappreciated or misunderstood by many visitors. But the evolution of that landscape is integral to the history of the site, from 20th-century development and adaptation, to 21st-century conservation, education, and enjoyment. Effective stewardship and interpretation of historic sites requires that we understand the evolution of their landscapes.

Farnsworth model from 1947 MoMA show
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE ARCHIVES
Over the past decade, the stewards of the Farnsworth House have begun devoting increasing attention to its landscape. They have commissioned studies of the landscape, prioritized its maintenance needs, made different interpretive choices, and planned improvements—notably to address the site’s flooding risk and to enhance the visitor experience. Ingenuity, resiliency, and adaptation will continue to be guiding principles as the Farnsworth landscape is rehabilitated and the site improved.

THE MCCORMICK FARM BECOMES THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE

Recent research has revealed that the first 10-acre parcel of what would become the Farnsworth landscape, purchased by Dr. Farnsworth in 1945, had been a large garden, most likely one growing vegetables—part of Col. Robert R. McCormick’s experimental Tribune Farm. McCormick, a gentleman farmer as well as owner and editor of the Chicago Tribune, owned 1,332 acres west of Yorkville, Illinois, and used that land for “conducting tests and searching for new and superior crops, breeds of animals and profitable methods and practices in the production of live stocks and feeds.”

In 1945, Edith Farnsworth purchased 10 acres of Robert R. McCormick’s experimental farm, later purchasing 50 additional acres (where 6 and 7 are shown on map). Farnsworth House was built above the iron truss bridge near the word “garden.”

MAP COURTESY OF TRIBUNE COMPANY ARCHIVES
Throughout the Great Depression, the Tribune published frequent reports from Tribune Farm to convey practical advice and humor. Several named animals made recurrent appearances in these columns, capturing the wholesome rural character increasingly idealized by Depression-era urban readers. Perhaps this rural ideal also appealed to the urbane Edith Farnsworth, who sought relaxation and the restorative powers of a country setting located a convenient distance from Chicago.

The Farnsworth House was sited at the south edge of an open meadow near the intersection of two main roads that bisected the Tribune Farm. Photographs taken during its construction show a tree-covered slope with a cluster of barns—which would be removed sometime during the 1950s—at the top. The house was nestled between existing trees—both for the pragmatic benefit of shade in summer, since the house originally had no air conditioning, and for the aesthetic benefit of showcasing the ever-changing natural scenery.

Built only yards from the generally slow-moving Fox River, the house was immediately northeast of a large iron truss bridge. This bridge may have been a factor in Mies’ site selection—the structure of the house echoes the rectangular framework and clear openings of the bridge. Because the Fox River was known to occasionally overflow its banks, Mies elevated the house more than five feet above grade to allow for periodic flooding.

Documentation suggests that Edith Farnsworth called upon Mies’ friend, colleague, and sometime employee—and noted Prairie School landscape architect—Alfred Caldwell for occasional advice. Early on, Farnsworth asked Caldwell to advise on a garden area located northwest of the house. Later, she wanted suggestions for screen plantings near the sleeping area of the house and a stone path to connect her parking area to the steps of the lower terrace.

Following McCormick’s death in 1955, a building contractor bought the remainder of Tribune Farm. But after the new owner failed to pay taxes, the state of Illinois foreclosed on the property, and most of the land eventually became Silver Springs State Park—thereby preserving the surrounding open space, natural setting,
and viewsheds surrounding the Farnsworth House. Conservation easements and county forest preserves help protect additional lands adjacent to Farnsworth.

Photographs from the 1950s show a meadowlike landscape with scattered trees and hedgerows, and oral histories confirm that a local farmer continued to cut hay from the original 10-acre parcel as well as from 50 acres of adjoining meadows that Farnsworth had purchased. By the 1960s, however, much of the acreage around the house had become overgrown with weedy species such as tree of heaven and multiflora rose. The influence of the ecology movement—which encouraged a return to natural landscapes—may have stopped the haying of the meadows. Or perhaps it was due to Dr. Farnsworth’s growing need for privacy, as her glass house was increasingly visited by architects, design enthusiasts, and curiosity seekers.

THE FARNSWORTH LANDSCAPE DURING THE PALUMBO ERA
In the late 1960s, as Farnsworth neared retirement, a county highway improvement program outlined plans to replace the historic iron truss bridge with a larger concrete bridge to be located 175 feet closer to the Farnsworth House. Farnsworth sued several times to prevent the change, but in 1969 the county used eminent domain to acquire nearly two acres of the site. Very soon afterward, she put the house up for sale. Peter Palumbo—a British lord, real estate developer, and collector of fine arts and architecture—purchased the property in 1972.

Lord Palumbo hired Lanning Roper, a noted British—and originally American—landscape architect, to improve the Farnsworth House grounds. Together they planted several hundred trees and shrubs, as well as thousands of hardy perennials and groundcovers, generally following the British Landscape Garden tradition. Palumbo and his family used the Farnsworth House and site during their annual summer visits to Illinois. Over time, he installed a boat house with direct access to the Fox River, an in-ground swimming pool, and a tennis court; he also improved and extended the Farnsworth-era garage building.

Following Roper’s death in 1983, Palumbo continued to develop the landscape with the professional guidance of Bernadette Doran,
who had worked with Roper as head gardener at another of Palumbo’s estates: Bagnor Manor in Berkshire, England. Doran helped create a garden of spring wildflowers in Roper’s memory and continued the development of an 18-acre sculpture walk that Palumbo and Roper had begun a few years earlier. The sculpture collection began along a loop path near the house, then expanded east into the former meadow.

While sculptures located along the first loop path were close together and visible from the house, the second, larger loop through the meadow allowed them to be spaced further apart, with trees planted to provide additional separation. The sculptures, which reflected Palumbo’s tastes and interests, included works by many modern masters such as Henry Moore, Andy Goldsworthy, and Jim Dine. Works by George Rickey, Harry Bertoia, and Michael Warren echoed the architecture of the site—as did the salvaged cupola from the junction of Poultry and Queen Victoria streets in London’s financial district. The latter, as well as a collection of familiar red British telephone boxes, while somewhat incongruous, may have held personal meaning for Palumbo.

By 1995, after completing a thorough restoration of the house and filling it with Mies-designed furniture, acquiring and installing the sculpture collection, and improving the overall landscape, Palumbo began construction of a visitor center and parking area—and soon
opened the property for limited public tours. Unfortunately, extreme floods in 1996 and 1997 filled the house with more than five feet of water. The considerable restoration cost and other personal matters prompted Palumbo to offer the property for sale to the state of Illinois in 1999.

After several years of inaction by the state, Palumbo decided to remove the sculptures and sell the Farnsworth House at auction. The Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois (now Landmarks Illinois) and the National Trust for Historic Preservation solicited private contributions to purchase the property, which they won in a dramatic bidding war in 2003. Landmarks Illinois operated the property until 2012, when it was transitioned to the National Trust. Landmarks Illinois continues to hold a preservation and conservation easement on the west half of the property, where the Farnsworth House, outbuildings, and cultural landscape are located.

TAKING STOCK: LANDSCAPE STUDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2008 landscape architecture students from the Illinois Institute of Technology, working under landscape historian Barbara Geiger, completed an assessment of the Farnsworth landscape. Their report includes a brief description of the site’s natural history and...
indigenous vegetation and documents the evolution of the landscape from 1945 to 2008. It recommends returning the house setting—the principal Roper landscape—to its more “natural” Farnsworth-era appearance, but returning the larger sculpture walk area to its Palumbo-era appearance and use, as well as installing pads for changing shows of outdoor sculpture. The report does not address outbuildings, farmland, or the visitor center.

In 2013 Retail & Development Strategies, Urban Design Associates, and Gallagher & Associates created a site use master plan for the property. The plan identifies several opportunities for developing and interpreting the site, including adding a new visitor center north of the sculpture walk, improving and more actively programming and interpreting the landscape, and exploring alternative uses for the existing visitor center and the farmland—such as on-site lodging and an educational farm.

In 2015 Krueck + Sexton Architects; Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.; and Liz Sargent, HLA, completed a preservation plan and cultural landscape study. The study was intended to assess Farnsworth’s current conditions and integrity and to make preliminary treatment recommendations for all structures and landscapes, including alternatives for flood protection and mitigation.

No landscape studies exist aside from an “as-built” tree survey completed in the late 1990s. However, many private collections of...
photographs that include the Farnsworth House landscape are currently being digitized for documentation and further research. In addition, the National Trust has commissioned digital copies of Farnsworth-related papers from the Lanning Roper Collection at the Royal Horticultural Library in London.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE CONDITIONS AND PLANS

Supporting its role as a historic site, the active maintenance and interpretation of the Farnsworth landscape have focused primarily on the area around the visitor center and the house itself. Site staff manage and interpret the Roper landscape near the house, hiring contractors to do most of the mowing, tree work, and occasional site improvements. The rest of the site receives minimal maintenance. Since 2003, portions of the loop walks have been discontinued. The boathouse, swimming pool, and tennis court remain unused, uninterpreted, and largely unmaintained. Many trees and shrubs have been lost from storms, floods, disease, or neglect—sometimes creating openings for more aggressive and often invasive species.

However, more recent decisions about the ongoing conservation of the Farnsworth House include preservation treatments of its outbuildings and cultural landscape. The inclusion of the McCormick era, which previous histories of the Farnsworth House had omitted, in interpretation at the visitor center—and in a future guidebook—will help explain the rural setting and provide context for visitors. Staff are planning new trails and seating overlooks along the river, with additional interpretation about the riverine ecology and natural history. Canoe and kayak groups will be encouraged to access the site by appointment, and the farm land will be studied for other possible uses. The naturalized landscape where Palumbo’s sculptures once stood will be conserved and more intensively managed, and the designed landscape setting surrounding the Farnsworth House will be rehabilitated and actively interpreted.

Recent site inspections by groups such as The Morton Arboretum Natural Resources program, the Chicago Botanic Garden Plants of Concern program, and The Conservation Foundation have identified several desirable native species—some indigenous to the site,
others introduced—that are surviving despite a dense canopy of largely invasive tree and shrub species that blocks sunlight and competes for moisture and nutrients. While many of these offending woody plants were introduced by wind, flooding, bird droppings, or animal scat, others were planted by Palumbo and Roper decades before their invasive characteristics were known. In recent years, this is being addressed through volunteer efforts to remove invasive trees and brush as well as fundraising for a landscape conservation management plan.

It is a continuous concern that two-thirds of the Farnsworth site is located below the 500-year flood level of the river. Its watershed comprises 2,658 square miles that are becoming increasingly developed, producing more storm water runoff and more frequent flood events. While the Farnsworth House itself has not experienced a severe flood since 2008, the site—and much of the landscape—must endure low-level flooding throughout much of the year. Since 2015 the National Trust, supported by Landmarks Illinois, has developed detailed designs for a concealed hydraulic lift system that will temporarily raise the Farnsworth House an additional nine feet during severe flood episodes.

Reinvesting in andreactivating the Farnsworth House landscape is integral to a more broadly defined site history and more inclusive
visitor experience that relate modern architecture and modern living to nature. Active and passive recreation, visual and performing arts, increased environmental awareness, and more forward-looking agricultural and land-use practices will foster greater opportunities for partnerships and programming, making the site more dynamic and engaging.

Mies van der Rohe himself penned the guiding vision for the Farnsworth House, no matter its use or ownership, when he said: “Nature, too, shall live its own life. We must beware not to disrupt it with the color of our houses and interior fittings. Yet we should attempt to bring nature, houses, and human beings together into a higher unity. If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from outside.”

Edith Farnsworth’s minimalist nature retreat seems especially prescient in the context of today’s stress-filled urban lifestyle. Through ongoing efforts to steward and interpret the landscape, the vision of van der Rohe, Farnsworth and Palumbo is shared to enhance the understanding, inspiration, and enjoyment for modern visitors. FJ

SCOTT MEHAFFEY is the executive director of the Farnsworth House. A registered landscape architect and Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, he teaches design history at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

**TAKEAWAY**
Learn about a 2017 design competition at Farnsworth

**TAKEAWAY**
Flood Mitigation: Choose Your Own Adventure (featuring Farnsworth)


3 Interviews with architect T. Paul Young, who worked for Dirk Lohan during the 1972 restoration of the Farnsworth House and taught with Alfred Caldwell at IIT.


6 The auction is well documented in the 2007 PBS documentary by Geoffrey Baer, Saved from the Wrecking Ball, available online from numerous sources.


