Activating Historic Spaces
Liberating Lyndhurst from the Tyranny of the Period of Significance

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Somewhere in the development of the professional practice of historic preservation, someone came up with the idea of the period of significance. The concept was that, to be properly understood and interpreted, a building needed to be restored and furnished to a specific period of time—its most important period—and all other architectural accretion needed to be stripped away, essentially sanitizing messy history.

For the houses of the founding fathers or for sites associated with a distinct era, like Colonial Williamsburg, this might have made sense. The institutions that first stewarded these places were founded to tell a very specific history—almost a glorified myth—about our shared origins as a country. However, the problem with using period of significance broadly for interpretation is that it ignores the way most buildings and neighborhoods of any age metamorphose and how ownership and usage change over time. Rare is the building that never undergoes any renovation.

Even worse, by emphasizing one time period, one architect, or one owner, period of significance interpretation relegates collections, landscapes, and whole histories as adjuncts and often tosses them into the dustbin. Rather than allowing a building and its surroundings to tell a multigenerational story of social change, we get stuck with a very neat and often very inaccurate interpretation of a site. Even among some of the best-documented historic properties, period of significance has created an ersatz history that is more myth than true chronicle. As the stewards of Colonial Williamsburg themselves admit, guides at the property’s opening were outfitted by Broadway costume shops to provide the proper “ye olden times” feeling.

Above all, period of significance tends to elevate concern for historic structures and their purportedly most important owner or
architect above their collections or landscapes. This has been particularly true at Lyndhurst, a National Trust Historic Site in Tarrytown, New York. The landscape itself and many of the structures added to it over the site’s 178 years have been discounted—at times, even disassembled—in efforts to honor the narrow period of significance defined by its architect and most prominent owner. The result not only distorted history but also limited opportunities for public interaction with the space. Today we are working to activate Lyndhurst and engage a broader community by recognizing the complex significance of its landscape and the diversity of its stories.

**WHAT’S FIT TO PRESERVE**

Lyndhurst is widely considered the most important and most seminal 19th-century house in the United States, and the masterpiece of Alexander Jackson Davis, one of the most influential American designers of the 19th century. Because of Lyndhurst’s architectural significance and the fact that it has retained many of the 50 pieces of furniture originally designed for the house by its architect, many other aspects of the estate have often been overlooked. The two most significant rich white men associated with the mansion have been the key focus of interpretation. Davis, who constructed the house between 1838 and 1842 and returned to double its size between 1864 and 1868, has received the most attention. Jay Gould, the railroad baron who was the third owner of the estate and one of the most famous characters of the Gilded Age, has also been spotlighted. The current focus, however, is on the landscape, which is an integral part of the story of Lyndhurst and its people.
Age, has been given secondary billing, in part because it was his family that donated the estate to the nation.

However, the extremely fine collections—including the many pieces of Davis furniture, the Tiffany and La Farge stained glass, the extensive suites of Herter Brothers furniture, and the excellent French academic paintings—were never given their due as artworks. The last two owners—philanthropist Helen Gould and Duchess of Talleyrand Anna Gould—have only been remembered as Jay Gould’s daughters, even though both were important in their own right, made significant additions to the estate, and were responsible for preserving it for posterity.

The 67-acre landscape has been the biggest victim of period of significance interpretation. It was almost completely forgotten and never given due attention in the site’s interpretation. When the house was first opened to the public in 1965, much of the landscape was still an overgrown mess. Many of the most important outbuildings were in great disrepair, including the 1894 bowling alley; the large swimming pool building; Jay Gould’s yacht bridge over the railroad lines of his competitors, the Vanderbilts; and the breathtaking 1882 greenhouse by manufacturer Lord & Burnham. Most egregious was the unceremonious removal of key landscape features that were erroneously seen as additions of the late 19th and 20th centuries—primarily the work of Gould’s two daughters and, as such, not considered worthy of serious preservation. At one point in the early 1970s, the extensive collection of marble garden sculpture was ripped out of the landscape and thrown into a pile next to the greenhouse. Paths were removed because the restorers at the time believed cement to be a modern material, even though the paths appear in period photographs from the 1860s. (Cement proliferated in New York after its introduction as the chief material used to construct the Erie Canal in the 1820s.) Wood and glass elements of the iron-framed greenhouse—not an A.J. Davis structure—were simply removed to the greenhouse basement. Period of significance interpretation allowed for the destruction of major elements of the landscape—those that track the stories of the women who were so important to the property—simply because they were not perceived to fit with an interpretation of the mansion.
as a masterwork of one of America’s most important architects or the prized possession of one of its economic titans.

While, in hindsight, this might seem shocking and wanton, this would have been totally appropriate in the Colonial Williamsburg school of restoring everything back to a specific period. Removal of later accretion was intended to create purity and clarity and to get rid of chaos.

TELLING A BROADER STORY THROUGH LANDSCAPE

Times change, and our ideas of importance change. At Lyndhurst, this means telling a far richer and broader story of how the estate tracks almost two centuries of a developing and evolving American cultural heritage. In particular, this has meant reintegrating Lyndhurst’s important landscape into the interpretation and overall use of the historic property. Consideration of Lyndhurst’s landscape is critical to an understanding of the function of the mansion, including changing uses over time, and to the developing ideas about our interaction with the landscape in the United States.

Lyndhurst sits on 67 acres on the Tappan Zee, the widest part of the lower Hudson River in what is now essentially New York City’s urban sprawl into Westchester. With other neighboring properties, Lyndhurst is part of a 125-acre waterfront oasis in an otherwise congested urban area. The history of Lyndhurst’s landscape is both long and well documented. Architect A.J. Davis began work on Lyndhurst in 1838, one year before he would make the acquaintance of Andrew Jackson Downing. While Downing is recognized as the father of American landscape architecture—his practice employed Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead, who would go on to build Central Park—it is not often remembered that both Davis and Downing considered themselves to be equally architects and landscapers. In true Romantic tradition, the placement of homes within a landscape was essentially seen as the creation of the picturesque, and both the architecture and landscape held equal weight.

In Lyndhurst, Davis created the first fully realized Gothic Revival mansion and marked the transition from classical architecture to Romanticism in the United States. Davis’ choice of Gothic
for Lyndhurst is a direct reflection of the craggy landscape. The house sits on a rocky outcropping overlooking the Hudson, and the Gothic style was seen as appropriate and organic to the site. As Frank Lloyd Wright would do 75 years later, Davis designed the exterior and interior of the building, as well as all its furniture and fittings; placed the building in the landscape; and probably redesigned the landscape around the mansion.

While there are no specific records of his landscape design, parts of the existing estate may be Davis’ only landscape project remaining in the country. The clues lie in a map created for the sale of Lyndhurst after its second owner, George Merritt, died unexpectedly after only a short residence in the mansion. The watercolor topographical map reveals which plants had been added in the landscape expansion of the 1860s and which had been in place for some time. Since only 30 years had passed between the occupancy of the original owners and the death of the second owner, the areas of the landscape shown as mature on the 1873 map are likely Davis’ work for Lyndhurst’s first owners or at least an 1840s landscape by a now-unknown designer. Recent inspections by knowledgeable landscape historians suggest that this work may even be an extremely early Davis/Downing collaboration, although further research is necessary.
Key among the elements of the early landscape are a series of three rock viewing platforms, made from gneiss rock sourced on the property, that were connected by a cement walkway starting at the front porch of the mansion. The walkway descended in a circle from the mansion and led through the summer shade of older trees on the lower lawn while providing structured views of both the building up the hill and the Hudson River down below. The first of the rockeries, a simple oval of rocks on a level spot surrounded by cedars, presented a dramatic view of the prominent Gothic features of the mansion. Shortly after came a large, three-tiered rockery surrounded by cedars and chestnuts and extensively planted with lily of the valley. At the center was a long pathway bordered by decorative gneiss boulders; at the top was an elaborate raised wooden bench sporting Davis’ Gothic decoration; and at the bottom level was a latticed, low bench affording panoramic views of the river. The third rockery, behind the northern end of the mansion, was terraced up a hill and also provided views of both the house and the river.

Surprisingly, the third rockery survives virtually unscathed, still surrounded by its trees and with its pebble sidewalks and border rocks still in place. The large rockery has sustained some damage, caused primarily by the uprooting of trees during major storms, but after years of being overgrown, it is remarkably intact. The first simple rockery lacks its trees but also remains in place. In addition to being depicted in the 1873 map, the large rockery was extensively
photographed in the late 1860s after the Merritts took possession of the house. Thus, we have early visual documentation of the placement of the trees and flora as well as the style and placement of the now-missing benches. Luckily, although the cement sidewalk was removed in the 1970s, its gravel underlayer still exists in the grass lawn, and modern technology will allow us to accurately plot the exact location of the original walkways throughout the property.

Because Lyndhurst’s landscape was developed and documented throughout the length of its occupancy, from the 1840s through the 1960s, presenting this history also allows us to tell a far more inclusive story about the various owners, particularly the last two women, who owned the property from the 1880s through the 1960s and made extensive additions to the landscape.

In particular, Helen Gould, Jay Gould’s eldest daughter and one of the longest-term owners of the property, became one of the leading philanthropists in the country and a major proponent of women’s economic empowerment. Gould had a number of recreational buildings constructed on the estate, including the riverside bowling pavilion built in 1894—a 7,000-square-foot building with two regulation bowling lanes, two parlors, and a large veranda overlooking the river. Interpretation of the newly restored building will provide the opportunity to explore layers of social history. At the time of the bowling alley’s construction, for example, private bowling lanes were a status symbol of the upper classes. Bowling
was of particular interest to Helen Gould as it was a sport that could be played equally and together by both men and women. However, it is believed that Gould had to use a male intermediary to purchase the lanes because the installer would not sell directly to a woman.

Gould later converted the bowling alley to provide venues for public enjoyment and vocational education. She used the northern parlor of the building as the headquarters for the sewing school she founded. Gould realized that the many immigrant women she employed as servants had no other training or way to make a living. Having learned to sew, they could get jobs in the New York garment industry, find their own apartments, and start families. Gould educated as many as 500 community women at a time, and the school welcomed women of different races and religions—an idea well ahead of its time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The sewing classes were often conducted outside to simultaneously teach women a trade and give them time away from their interior housework in the daylight and fresh air.

RESTORATION AND REVIVAL
Lyndhurst recently received a grant from New York state to begin a $1 million project to restore the early landscape between the mansion and the Hudson River. When work is completed, visitors to Lyndhurst will be able to step off the front veranda and take a guided walk through the series of 1840s rockeries, exploring gardens and shady specimen trees while enjoying picturesque views of the mansion and the river. The ultimate destination will be the riverside bowling alley, which will open for the first time after 30 years of ongoing work—a centerpiece of the landscape restoration project.

Restoring the landscape will bring many benefits to the estate. It will re-establish the balance between the architecture and its setting that was so important to Davis and that gives a much better sense of how the property was originally designed, sited, and used. Even more important, the improvement in the lower landscape—the first to be refurbished—will open the property to new audiences and allow us to tell a broader story about the history of ownership.
Lyndhurst is not alone among historic properties that are looking for ways to attract new audiences. Those who might come to Lyndhurst to view the interior of the mansion will probably come only once in a lifetime. Landscape and garden aficionados, however, tend to be repeat visitors to a historic property. They like to see the gardens throughout the seasons and will often come in the spring, summer, and fall to experience the changes. By emphasizing Lyndhurst’s early and important landscape, we will provide a whole new experience to a completely new set of visitors.

On an even larger scale, Lyndhurst’s landscape restoration seeks to attract an audience that is not interested in historic houses or historic landscapes—specifically, those interested in nature, the Hudson River, and new opportunities for recreation. Lyndhurst is bisected by two major regional trails, the Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park Trail and the Westchester County RiverWalk. Both extend for more than 20 miles—leading from New York City, along the Hudson River, deep into Westchester County—and bring recreationalists through the Lyndhurst estate. In 2018 a major bridge on the New York State Thruway just north of Lyndhurst will open, connecting the west and east banks of the river and providing a pedestrian and bicycle pathway across the bridge. This will link to the RiverWalk and Aqueduct paths, bringing multiple new visitors through the Lyndhurst landscape. The restored lower landscape will provide one of the best places to enjoy views of the river as well as shelter and—just as important—public restrooms and refreshments.
Other historic properties in the Hudson Valley that offer opportunities for both tours and recreation report that four to five times the number of visitors come for the landscape as for the historic house tours.

Restoration and reintegration of the landscape is just one example of how we’re re-examining and reinterpreting Lyndhurst. We’re in the process of restoring the observation tower and laundry building as well as reopening the various servants’ rooms and kitchens. In past years, we’ve rehung the picture gallery to emphasize the best artworks rather than the historically exact hanging scheme. We’ve redone bedrooms—some to 1860, others in the same house and on the same floor to 1940.

Ultimately, we’re trying to give visitors much broader opportunities to interact with the whole property. If visitors only want to walk their dogs, enjoy the shade, and have a snack, we view that as a totally appropriate experience. Quite frankly, that’s closer to the way the original inhabitants of the estate enjoyed the property than a museum visit. For those who want a formal tour of the mansion, its collections, and its landscape, we’re able to tell the full 175 years of its history, including that of its many owners and workers—men and women who made it a unique place.

Very few of our visitors care whether we have interpreted Lyndhurst mansion and its furnishings to a very specific date. They only know whether it engaged them in the way they wanted to be engaged. FJ

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**TAKEAWAY**
See a slideshow about determining your site’s period of significance.

**MAP**
Use an interactive map to compare Lyndhurst in 1873 with Lyndhurst today.