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Thematic Development of a Landscape [Place Portfolio]

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Thematic Development of a Landscape
Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, recently doubled its size by buying an adjacent property. The challenge was to create a larger Tanglewood that retained the feeling and spirit of the original, smaller landscape.

Continuity with history was important as well, a history that began with Eliel Saarinen's sketches for a center for the performing arts. He proposed an idealized landscape designed in a neoclassical manner, but what the trustees wanted was “just a shed.” The large Performance Shed was designed and constructed by a local engineer based on Saarinen's sketches.

The layout of the original property, as well as the newly acquired property, was focused on the manor house, sited in each property at the highest point and commanding the best view of the Stockbridge Bowl and the hills beyond. The landscape retained its natural character, with minimal intervention: only a few straight paths, most moving with the contours in soft curves, and no axial relationships.

Other buildings were built for rehearsal and performance. These were sheds also, built in a Scandinavian style, typically asymmetrical and placed at the edges of the great lawns that surrounded the manor house (the most notable of these was the theater-concert hall, designed by Eero Saarinen). They all declared their purposes simply, and they merged with adjacent landscape elements to create subtle interruptions in a continuous defining edge of the Tanglewood precinct (the exception to the naturalistic edge was the main gate, also by Eero Saarinen, which picked up on one of the strong straight defining edges of his father's original sketch.)

The effect was to create a sharply defined linear zone, reinforced with a linear planting of evergreens, through which one entered the inner landscape, emphasizing the transition from the outer world of travel and arrival. The extraordinary lawns and the view of the Stockbridge Bowl coupled with these buildings to form the vivid and memorable place of Tanglewood that afforded extraordinary and memorable experiences of music.

Our work proceeded from our perceptions of the place, and it was carried out in close association over a period of several years with the Tanglewood administration and staff, and with the client committee. Because the new property was at the same elevation as the original, we proposed to extend the lawn continuously into the new property, creating what we termed the Performance Plateau.
Above: The Music Shed restroom building incorporates both ventilating clerestory opening windows and fixed clerestory glazing. Rafter and trusses are left exposed.

Above right: Canopies of the Tanglewood Cafe stretch over the eating area and to the lawn. The building is framed by trees at its back and sides.

Right: Clerestory and high vertical windows offer natural ventilation for the Rehearsal Hall. Studded beams and rafters are exposed, providing acoustics that are well suited for soloists and for small and large ensembles. The sliding doors are open and face the Performance Path.

Lower right: Rehearsal Hall opens and is parallel to the Performance Plateau and Path. One of several new buildings that reinforce the edge of the Tanglewood campus, it also forms its own place by being inserted among the mature trees of the former Highwood Estate.

Photo: Catharine A. Verhulst

Although we had to extend the Tanglewood precinct, we broke it into subsections in order that the new and larger territory be accessible without being obvious; we wished to achieve continuity and a sense of unity without an increase in scale. We reinforced the edges of the property in order to guarantee a close transition from outside the performance areas into that memorable place of Tanglewood.

New buildings were to be built in ways that would merge with the landscape at the edges of the inner precincts. We proposed a site, on the new property opposite the existing Theater Concert Hall, for what
movement with and against the contours of the land and through careful opening and control of vistas and views. Outside the performance areas, we deployed parking and access roads to reinforce the new shape of the Tanglewood campus, to give easy access to the existing and new parts of the property, to create a clear organization for arrival and parking, and to increase the safety of pedestrian circulation.

Our project included eleven new buildings, three building renovations, new roads, parking lots and paths plus several re-grading projects for extending the campus lawn—the Performance Plateau. We also coordinated all work for installation of major utilities: water, sewer, electric and telephone lines, drainage and irrigation lines. Finally, tree and shrub planting, combined with wildflowers and cultivated flowering beds, completed the work.

Distinctive new places include two major entrance gates, a new café and commissary kitchen, a new recital room facility for the Music School, a chamber music rehearsal studio, a percussion rehearsal studio and new locations and facilities for the Tanglewood Tent Club and Hawthorne Special Events Tent. A new Performance Park links the original Shed with the new Ozawa Concert Hall, which was designed by William Ross and Associates.

Most of the buildings are background buildings, albeit with some identifiable design features. They are designed to foreground activity, and to create a sense of place. They insure continuity throughout the campus, as well as the presence of the past, through repeating elements, relationships and orientations of existing and new buildings. Their asymmetrical design calls for visual completion by elements outside the buildings, emphasizing place-making rather than object-making. A variety of porches create a sense of invitation and accommodation, and they insure an active conversation among buildings, as well as with landscape features that surround them.

These characteristics, combined with gently sloped roofs, exposed columns and open grass work, clerestories, vertical bond and hewn stone, declare a recognizable and unifying design fabric that stands in deliberate contrast with the timber houses, but in sympathy with the original built and natural landscape of Tanglewood.