

PREFACE

Like historic buildings and their interiors, historic landscapes require specialized approaches for their preservation and long-term management. Architecture and interiors have traditions and methodologies for preservation that have been in use for centuries. Restoration architects and material conservators have developed highly refined processes for the documentation and treatment of architectural fabric. Universities offer specialized graduate degrees for architects working in this arena. An entire industry has developed to supply the demand for the architectural products, building materials, paints, mortars, and fixtures necessary to reproduce and repair the fabric of historic buildings. The same is true for historic interiors. This has not been the case with historic landscapes.

Unlike the preservation of historic buildings, which has been occurring on a large scale in the United States since the 1920s, preservation of landscapes as a specialized methodology is a relatively young endeavor in America. Recognizing the need for parallel technologies and processes appropriate for the preservation of cultural and historic landscapes, the field of cultural landscape preservation emerged about forty years ago. In 1981, the National Park Service (NPS) “first recognized cultural landscapes as a specific resource type,” and “more than any other organization or agency...[the NPS] provided the most significant direction to the nascent cultural landscape preservation movement.”¹ In 1984, the NPS published *Cultural Landscapes: Rural Historic Districts in the National Park System*, a document that “spelled out criteria for identifying and defining cultural landscapes.”²

Tremendous strides have been made in the field of landscape preservation since that publication, but the need to raise awareness is all the more urgent with the rise in extreme weather events and the general fragility and ephemeral character of landscapes. Barring natural or accidental disasters, buildings are relatively static structures, but the very nature of any landscape is change. Landscapes are constantly in a state of growth or decline, making them difficult to document, stabilize, or preserve.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE REPORT AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

Since laying groundwork in the 1980s, “the NPS has continued to provide both intellectual and practical leadership for the landscape preservationist movement.”³ In 1998, the NPS published *A Guide to Cultural Landscape Reports*. This document continues to prescribe the standard methodology for documenting, treating, and managing cultural landscapes in the United States. The NPS manages 419 properties, and many of them are documented, treated, and managed through the use of a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR).

The NPS defines a CLR in the following way:

The Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) serves two important functions: it is the principle treatment document for cultural landscapes and the primary tool for long-term management of those landscapes.⁴

More recently, in 2000, scholars Arnold Alanen and Robert Melnick described a CLR in greater detail:

Typically interdisciplinary in nature, the CLR includes documentation, analysis, and evaluation of historical, architectural, archaeological, ethnographic, horticultural, landscape architectural, engineering, and ecological data. It analyzes the landscape’s historical development, evolution, modifications, materials, construction techniques, geographical context, and use in all periods, including those deemed not significant. Based on the analysis, it makes recommendations for treatment consistent with the landscape’s significance, condition and planned use.

The scope and level of investigation vary depending on management objectives. It may focus on an entire landscape or on individual features within it.⁵

Ideally, the development of a Master Plan for a cultural landscape will follow a CLR. It is common, however, for a CLR to be created in conjunction with, or even after, the creation of a Master Plan. For this reason, a CLR is intended to work with existing plans.

3 Alanen and Melnick, *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*.

4 Robert Page, Cathy A. Gilbert, and Susan A. Dolan, *A Guide to Cultural Landscape Reports*. US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships, Washington, DC, 1998.

5 “Research,” National Park Service, www.nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes/research.htm#CLR.

MAKING MEANING VISIBLE: THE BRACKENRIDGE PARK CLR

In 2016, the City of San Antonio commissioned a Master Plan for Brackenridge Park. The Brackenridge Park Master Plan was approved in February 2017. In June 2018, the Brackenridge Park Conservancy, in partnership with the San Antonio River Authority and San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, commissioned a CLR for Brackenridge Park.

Whereas the Master Plan provides a plan “to shape the future development and rehabilitation”⁶ of the park, the CLR is tailored to provide a holistic understanding of the entire landscape from ecological and cultural perspectives. As a long-term management and treatment document, the CLR

1. provides analysis of broad historical and contemporary contexts relevant to Brackenridge Park’s development and present circumstances;
2. documents Brackenridge Park’s history;
3. evaluates the health of the park’s biotic systems;
4. defines the cultural significance of the landscape;
5. evaluates the physical and visible integrity of the landscape;
6. is the principal treatment document for the preservation of this cultural landscape; and
7. is the primary tool for the site’s long-term management.

Ultimately, the 2017 Brackenridge Park Master Plan recommendations should be measured and fine-tuned against the overarching treatment recommendations this CLR provides.

The consultant team hired to execute the CLR consisted of the landscape architecture firm Reed Hilderbrand (Cambridge, Massachusetts), landscape architectural historians Suzanne Turner Associates (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), and the ecological research consulting arm of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (Austin, Texas). The Brackenridge Park CLR, in conjunction with an Ecological Site Assessment, was completed over a period of seventeen months, beginning in June 2018 and ending in November 2019.

The clients’ decision to involve the Wildflower Center in a preservation process that conventionally focuses on human culture and on the social and design histories connected to landscapes was crucial and brilliant. It demonstrated that park leadership comprehends the primacy of the San Antonio River in the formation of the city, the magnitude of Brackenridge Park’s compromised ecological and cultural health, and the inherent relationship that exists between ecology and culture in this landscape.

The Brackenridge Park CLR is modeled after the NPS process for initiating and guiding cultural landscape preservation, although it is also tailored specifically to the needs of the site and the clients. In the CLR, the site’s history and existing conditions were documented. This information was then used to analyze whether the Brackenridge landscape is culturally and/or historically significant. A Statement of Significance was developed to outline the ways in which the Brackenridge Park landscape is culturally significant at the national, state, and local levels. The landscape’s integrity was then evaluated—that is, the consultant team assessed whether the present conditions of the Brackenridge Park landscape provide

6 “Brackenridge Park Master Plan,” San Antonio, TX, February 21, 2017, p. 1, brackenridgepark.org/files/large/b163e99c63315d1.

users with an intact, visible, and easily understood experience of what makes the landscape culturally or historically significant or, alternatively, whether the present conditions are so compromised that the landscape’s significance is no longer detectable. This assessment was used to generate a formal Determination of Integrity.

The final component of the CLR is a Treatment Plan. This is a set of recommendations that is informed by NPS-defined approaches to protecting landscapes. The level of integrity the cultural landscape possesses “influences treatment decisions regarding what features to preserve [‘as is’], where to accommodate change for contemporary use [and to what degree], and where to reestablish missing features.”⁷ This CLR’s treatment chapter identifies an overarching approach to preserving and treating the site, priorities that support the overarching approach, suggested management investigations and practices, further research and documentation needs, and basic suggestions for exploring financial strategies to sustain the park. CLR recommendations specific to ecological health were developed in collaboration with the Wildflower Center. The treatment aims to make Brackenridge Park a more sustainable landscape that is ecologically, culturally, and financially resilient and relevant well into the twenty-first century and beyond. The chapter also includes recommended next steps, so park leadership can quickly act.

Recommendations related to site interpretation are also integral to treatment of any cultural landscape. Interpretation involves determining what narratives will communicate the multilayered story of the landscape to the visitor. This will be no easy feat for Brackenridge Park, but it is of utmost importance. In this CLR, decisions were made about *which stories* and *whose stories* to tell. The Brackenridge Park CLR Treatment advocates for a multidisciplinary and culturally inclusive interpretation that will be inseparable from the park’s major landscape systems and future projects.

At face value, a CLR is a thorough historic documentation—a technical report—but it also serves an ambitious purpose. It puts a cultural landscape into a larger perspective and utilizes the landscape’s past to set the course for its future. A CLR is an action plan. It declares implementable answers to the following questions: Why does this place still matter today? As we heal and care for this place, how should its meaning be made clear? And, within the web of important histories, which have the greatest potential to communicate to present and future users the meaning of this place and its contemporary relevance?

7 Page, Gilbert, and Dolan, *A Guide to Cultural Landscape Reports*, 101.