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From the ground up

As architects engage their work with the earth, a new kind of building emerges

By Robert Ivy, FAIA

How, at a time when a natural waterborne cataclysm so completely overwhelmed human effort and human life, can we focus on architectural trends? Hasn't Hurricane Katrina ravaged our own sensibilities and energies?

The following pages, however, represent a development in architectural thinking that may prove eerily appropriate. By engaging their minds and work with the earth itself, a new generation of architects is paying unusual attention to the land, and to our relationship to the planet. This new architecture, occurring at the intersection of topography and geography, achieves almost primordial power by examining the way the world lies, then inserting architecture into and within the existing fabric—at once aware and respectful of natural demands.

Included in this section are projects that step down hillsides, slip into rolling contours, and bury into the landscape. A surprising photo essay documents a contemporary installation in the desert that achieves prehistoric forcefulness by aligning the Earth with the cosmos. The operative term for this new work is relationship, of earth to structure, structure to atmosphere, place to person.

While the underlying theory may seem abstract, even ethereal, the reality proves more solid and grounded. RECORD invites you to dig in.

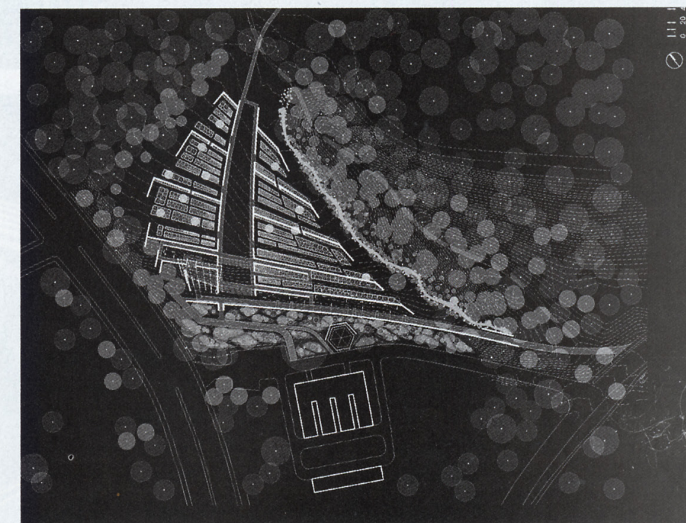
PROJECTS INTRODUCTION

Reed Hilderbrand and Maryann Thompson join forces for the new LEVENTRITT SHRUB AND VINE GARDEN in Boston

By Deborah Snoonian, P.E.

Being tapped to design a garden for plant experts sounds as daunting as cooking a holiday meal for Julia Child and Jacques Pépin, but Glen Valentine, a project manager with landscape architect Reed Hilderbrand in Watertown, Massachusetts, describes working with Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum as a partnership of complementary strengths. "The client was demanding about the horticultural requirements, which makes sense—plants aren't just ornaments to them, they're the lifeblood of their institution," he says. "But they fully supported our ideas for creating a framework for their new collection." He's talking about the Leventritt Vine and Shrub Garden, which Reed Hilderbrand designed with Maryann Thompson Architects of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Though clearly Modern in character, this green oasis in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood nevertheless feels as timeless and classic as a string of pearls (or steak tartare, to continue the metaphor).

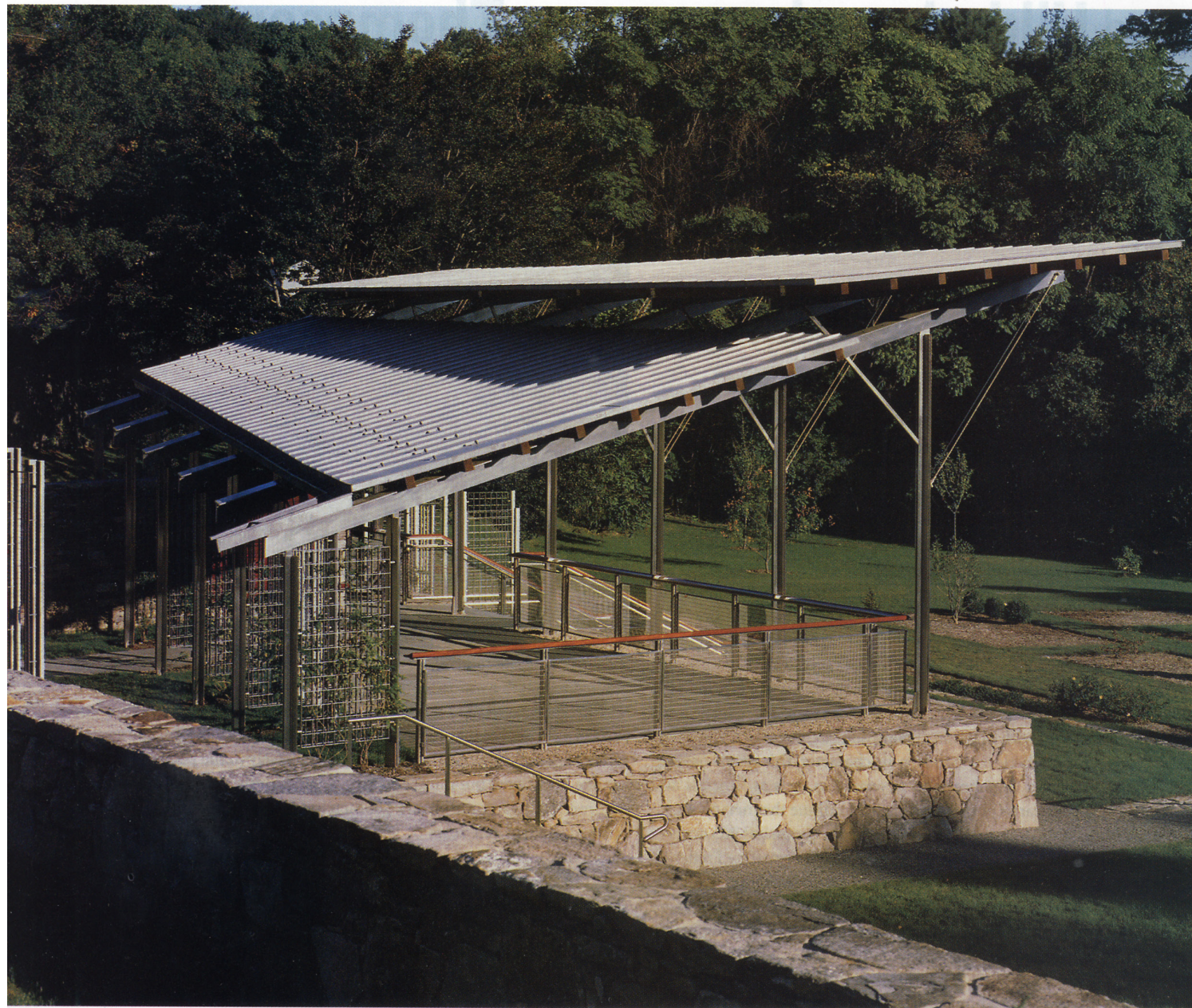
Founded in 1872, the Arnold Arboretum comprises 265 acres of Boston's 7-mile-long Emerald Necklace, and was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Sprager Sargent, the arboretum's first director. Harvard set aside a 3.5-acre parcel for planting vines and shrubs that are difficult to grow or care for elsewhere on the grounds. The design team they tapped had worked together congenially on other projects, and this one proved no different. "Our aesthetic sensibilities are very similar, and we share ideas freely," says Thompson.



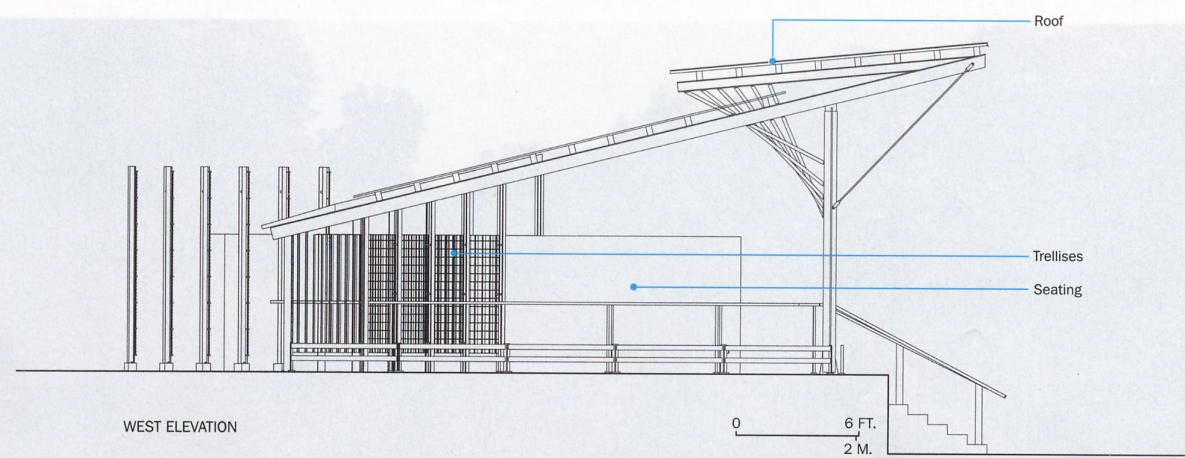
The site (above), shaped like a blade of a pinwheel, drops 30 feet toward its northernmost point and is bounded on the east by a stream. The arboretum needed a flexible classroom space and gathering spot as well as a garden, so Thompson placed an open-air pavilion at the southwest corner of the slope that opens up expansively to the plantings below. Unlike traditional botanical gardens, Reed Hilderbrand eschewed a rigid symmetrical plan or arbitrary geometric construct around the pavilion. Instead, he laid out rows of wide terraces that slide and fan their way down the sloped terrain. A central processional lawn cuts through them at

Project: Arnold Arboretum Leventritt Shrub and Vine Garden, Boston
Architects: Reed Hilderbrand Associates (landscape); Maryann Thompson Architects (pavilion, trellises, stone walls)
Engineers: Arup (structural); Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (civil); Haley & Aldrich (geotechnical)
General contractor: Lee Kennedy





A slot between the pavilion's roof surfaces lets sunlight through (below). The central lawn sweeps through the terraces (bottom). Thompson designed the galvanized steel trellises, which can be removed for maintenance (opposite, bottom).



The pavilion's angled roof surfaces mirror the planted terraces (above). Local fieldstone used for a retaining wall and throughout the garden adds a dimension of permanence and serenity (opposite).





a grade gentle enough for handicapped access. “We wanted the natural form of the land to dominate the feel of the garden,” says Valentine. Maintenance equipment can be maneuvered easily through the terraces, and the plants climb trellises of steel, designed by Thompson, that can withstand the viselike grip of woody vines and shrubs without warping.

The tranquil landscape belies what was a behemoth effort to replace half the site’s fill with a special mix of soil that could nourish the plants, and aptly disguises a complex irrigation and drainage system. Nary a sprinkler head nor an errant hose detracts from the setting.

It’s best to enter the garden from the east, at the base of the 600-foot-long fieldstone wall that forms the site’s southern backbone. The wall rises to 7 feet in height, drawing you into the garden and establishing a sense of intimacy and enclosure despite the hum of nearby traffic. This pathway leads directly to Thompson’s pavilion, a simple structure with a stone floor and brushed-stainless-steel beams and columns supporting a

tongue-and-groove cedar roof overlaid with copper. The shifting geometry of the struts and columns evokes the branches of vine structure: growing all around, and its juxtaposition of man-made and organic materials is an apt metaphor for a curated collection of plant life.

Far from being just a resource for the arboretum, the Leventritt Garden is the most significant addition to Boston’s public park system in many years. Reed Hilderbrand and Thompson have added their own sculptural jewel to Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace, one clearly poised to stand the test of time. ■

Sources

Stainless-steel columns, railings, and beams: *Ironcrafters*
Fieldstone and stonework: *M&F Masons*

Irrigation: *Irrigation Consulting*

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.archrecord.com.