

Infinite Urban Landscapes: A Journey Through Cambridge, Massachusetts

by

Leah B. Brunetto

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN ARCHITECTURE
AT THE
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Signature of Author: _____
Department of Architecture
May 25, 2012

Certified by: _____
Azra Aksamija
Assistant Professor of Art, Culture, and Technology
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: _____
Meejin Yoon
Professor of Architecture
Director of the Undergraduate Architecture Program

THESIS COMMITTEE

Advisor:

Azra Aksamija, PhD

Assistant Professor of Art, Culture, and Technology

Reader:

Anne Whiston Spirn

Professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the forms of urban landscapes influence and reflect physical and metaphorical journeys through a city. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the artist and researcher investigates the diverse landscapes of her native Cambridge, Massachusetts: from her own backyard to the Minuteman Bikeway. Places such as public parks once felt physically infinite and natural in childhood, but are revealed as man-made and enclosed by the inorganic frameworks of the city. The level of fragmentation in landscapes experienced increases along the timeline of life, reflecting increased pace and complexity further away from home. These energetic forms lead to city exits such as highways, where one-point perspective reintroduces the notion of infinity.

Methods of research include site studies, a literature review, and the development of a form generation process leading to the production of an exhibition of paintings. While at first glance some of the featured landscapes appear natural, their artificiality is revealed by the geometries of elements such as fences, pavement, and bridges. The compositions were developed iteratively using digital photography and tracing to find the most dynamic forms and rhythms. Site photos were deconstructed literally into two different layers: inorganic and organic. The final paintings subtract the inorganic layers from the organic layers, resulting in a distinctly modern, urban aesthetic.

Thesis Supervisor: Azra Aksamija, PhD

Title: Assistant Professor of Art, Culture, and Technology

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PRELUDE

Lying in bed as a young child, I looked out the window at night, and there was not darkness, but light. The street lamps illuminated the trees outside my window, creating the feeling of being inside a forest. On stormy nights, I watched the trees flail in the wind. Harsh fluorescent lights bounced off the raindrops. Even though the house was protected from the elements, the window offered an extension into the leaves, wind, and rain.

It is significant that my bedroom window faced that side of the house. While they once seemed large, the trees there are part of a meager line that separates the house from a parking lot filled with compact cars. On the opposite side of the house is a hardware store, and directly in front is a narrow two-way street that feeds into a dangerous intersection. Even though I was aware of those distinctly urban features, I was content to forget them. In reality, I was surrounded by the walls and window, but in my dreams: by a forest.



Figure 1. My bedroom window (October 2011).

THESIS TOPIC

This study explores the tension between a perception of infinite wilderness in the city and the reality that its living environments are largely manmade. I investigate my hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts, which has diverse and numerous green spaces for a small city.¹ Through text and imagery, I recollect a journey through these landscapes: starting in my backyard and moving toward the edges of the city.

My inspiration is the illusion of natural landscapes, such as forests and knolls. My strongest attachments to the city are related to its living environments: its soil and water. Yet, a patch of mowed grass alone does not make a landscape—it must be part of a greater system, composed of a variety of living elements such as trees and bushes, and of nonliving elements such as concrete steps and asphalt pathways.

Though many living environments self-contained to a degree, they are part of the greater urban landscape of the city. The concept of an “urban landscape” is multilayered. It may refer to the physical arrangement of elements, such as paths and landmarks, which are present in all cities and compose recognizable images.² The term may also refer to urban social structures or collective memories associated with parts of a city and their cultural groups, which develop over periods of time.³ Urban landscapes—including their green spaces—are not

¹ Cambridge has five hundred acres of “public open space and recreational facilities”. “2007 Cambridge

² Lynch identifies “formal types of image elements”: paths, landmarks, edges, nodes, and districts which compose a city’s image. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 1-13.

³ Hayden stresses the importance in preserving urban landscapes that embody the history and memories of a city’s diverse inhabitants (particularly, minorities and women). A broader cultural history of Cambridge, Massachusetts is outside the scope of this thesis, but I thread observations related to

static scenes, but rather, shape and are shaped by the people who live in the city.⁴ The concept of “landscape”, as opposed to “site” is more fitting, given the active nature of the memories I explore in this study. For example, I consider a “site” to be the area under a tree where I meet my neighbor, whereas the landscape is the entire park where that tree is rooted. A site is a destination, whereas a landscape is the stage for a journey.

Important to this study is the distinction of these landscapes from the wilderness apart from the city. Given the skill of the landscape architects who have shaped green spaces in the city, I am likely not the only one to be fooled by their surface images. The key word is enclosure: while some green spaces in city appear to be protected natural areas, most were created after the surrounding area was developed. Cambridge’s Mayor Danehy Park, a former landfill, was transformed into a recreational area with a wide array of wildlife, yet it still lies on the same geometric plot of land.⁵ In other instances, development closes in on natural features, such as the major roads of Storrow Drive and Memorial Drive, which hug the Charles River.

The patchwork of living and nonliving environments is evident in looking at maps both at the scale of the neighborhood and the nation. Though natural processes deeply affect built environments, mapping conventions typically segregate places of “nature” from places of civilization. Both local parks and national forests are both labeled as green patches, which

ethnicity as they relate to specific, sub-landscapes of the city. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (Cambridge : MIT Press, 1995), 3-13.

⁴ The Danish, German, Dutch, and Old English forms of the word “landscape” combine of two roots: the first meaning “both a place and the people living there”, and the second meaning “to shape”. Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 16.

⁵ "Danehy Park," Cambridge Department of Human Services, accessed December 14, 2011, <http://www2.cambridgema.gov/dhsp2/danehy.cfm>

generalizes otherwise distinct land types. On Google Maps, an icon of a pine tree lies alongside the name of an urban park, suggesting a parallel to wilderness in the city. This comparison, is, perhaps, ideological, give the many differences between the two land types:

Forests—while contained, protected, and labeled—have more signs of uninterrupted life cycles. Even designated trail paths, which are visible on regional maps, are littered with fallen trees and rocks (Figure 2). In urban parks, smooth asphalt paths are bare and assuredly visible far into the distance. It is very easy to leave an urban landscape and find one's way back home or to a familiar place. There are no dangers of animals, ravines, or other dangerous obstacles. Since these areas often open, one can see buildings and landmarks in the distance, which offer a sense of security.

As a species, we have been typically limited to activity during the day. While walking through a forest at night, travelers rely on trail blazes and portable lights. It can be frightening, especially at night, when trees are dark, looming, and encompassing. It is difficult to gauge depth, and the forest can spark the imagination in a terrifying way. Though most public parks officially close at dusk, many have their own lights that turn on automatically. Street lamps and lights from windows may cast a yellowish glow on the grass, guiding the late night traveler home. Seasonally, Christmas lights draped over trees produce a more crystalline, often blue light (Figure 3). This illumination of cities creates a new aesthetic and sense of the presence of other people.



Figure 2. Path in the White Mountains (March 2012).



Figure 3. Raymond Park at night (December 2011).

The city eliminates, as best as it can, signs of decay and death. Landscaping crews maintain and “improve” the city’s image by planting and mowing, for instance. Institutions like universities maintain these images over time to affirm identity and emphasize their prestige. Signs of depletion, such as the trampling of certain paths in grass as people walk over them, are replenished or avoided by the erection of barriers. The result is an illusion of infinite time, altered only by the change of seasons and reflected most prominently by the decline or growth of plant life and freezing or thawing of water. Otherwise, these designed landscapes, being maintained so meticulously and lacking natural events such as tides and overgrowth of grass, suspend a visitor in time in the absence of signs of construction.⁶

The development and maintenance of these living systems presents tension between the city as it is, and the place it is desired to be. The aesthetics of natural landscapes arouse our most primitive responses, and can transcend space and time in their untouched states.⁷ It is desirable to feel surrounded by nature, yet civilization still shapes living environments to avoid their inconveniences⁸.

Unlike older land, which often contains landscapes soaked in ancient history and folklore, constraint by culture is more limited in these relatively young American urban landscapes. The lack of widely accepted expectations associated with them gives urban

⁶ The Charles River was dammed to prevent tides from bringing sewage to the newly developed Back Bay area. It is hard to imagine it any other way today. Max Hall, *The Charles: The People’s River* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1986), 38.

⁷ Jay Appleton’s theory of “prospect and refuge” is a critical aspect of this thesis. The theory argues that our innate and simultaneous desires for exploration and safety draw us to particular images. In his book, Appleton discusses this first using an ethological approach, and also applies it to the arts. Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London : John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 1996), 73.

⁸ Even Henry David Thoreau, who is well known for his writings on nature and residence at Walden Pond, spoke of “the cultural refinements of the civilized landscape”. Ibid, 37-38.

landscapes the potential to provide significance to the individual, and by groups collectively as time progresses.⁹

Before I started this investigation, I had developed an informal inventory of places and experiences in Cambridge that I eventually wanted to explore artistically; even in an unordered list, they formed a loose narrative. I set out to study these sites more objectively, examining their histories, contexts, and construction. In doing so, I found a logic for linearizing them and their associated memories into a visual narrative.

I was guided by the question:

How do the forms of urban landscapes influence and reflect physical and metaphorical journeys through a city?

⁹ Heaney describes poets who break away from the expectations of ancient landscapes: “None of these poets surrenders himself to the mythology of his place but instead each subdues the place to become an element in his own private mythology”. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 148.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My approach to this question was interdisciplinary, using site studies, a literature review, and the development of a form generating process. Based on these studies, I grouped my collection of landscapes based on their similarities and placed them on the timeline of my life in the city, a hierarchy which informed the final collection of artwork.

This study spanned fall 2011 through spring 2012, but drew upon memories from childhood and adolescence. The landscapes I chose were derived from these experiences, which kept the research engaging, meaningful, and more specific. I drew from the specificity of my own personal experiences to paint a perhaps unexpected picture of urban life. By starting the investigation, literally, in my own backyard, I was able to get at the poignancy of issues which have implications as both artistic explorations and critical design ideas.

Before diving into the expressive aspects of these landscapes, I spent time exploring the academic fields of landscape architecture and urban studies to better understand the subtle differences between the terms “nature” and “landscape”, “site” and “landscape”, as well as to review existing studies about the development of green spaces in cities. Research using primary evidence—as collected through photography and journaling—was conducted first, then informed by literature, and then sites were reobserved with newer expectations. Even traveling out of state, I continued journaling and taking photos; research was not limited to time formally spent on the project.

Google Maps was a useful tool for comparing the locations of sites in context to one another. Zooming in and out of the satellite images helped to see overall forms. The process

often revealed how isolated living environments may be—appearing as islands of green which stand out from the city far up. It was striking to see the relatively high proportion of trees in particular areas, such as residential areas, as well as the true shapes of landscapes such as the Charles River and Fresh Pond, which, in person, feel roughly linear and circular respectively, but in fact are quite windy.

I investigated several specific landscapes in Cambridge—some well known and others obscure. Some are within prestigious institutions, but may be invisible to the passerby. Often, I found or rediscovered these places as friends took me through there casually. They often are not the most obvious ways to travel to one’s destination—perhaps what brings a richness to the city; a tapestry of green space and roads is more engaging than a rigid grid or structureless plain. This, compounded with personal associations with landscapes, makes these truly *journeys* through the city rather than simply site analyses.

The linkage of objective observations and personal memories helped me build a better vocabulary for discussing my landscapes of interest. What I found was that the structure of particular landscapes corresponded to the type of experience I had there, and the most significant period of time I spent there.

I have identified five recurring landscape systems, each of which includes a living environment:

1. *Private landscapes*: backyards and gardens, which are enclosed by fences, homes, and other buildings;
2. *Neighborhood landscapes*: public recreational space, usually fitted to the grid of the immediate area;

3. *Courtyard landscapes*: public or semi-public spaces surrounded by buildings, which are often hidden from view from the street;
4. *Shoreline landscapes*: bodies of water, including the green space and infrastructure which enclose them;
5. *Exit landscapes*: paths for vehicles, including the green spaces on either side, which separate them from residential or commercial areas.

I present these systems in this order as a reflection of the order in which I experienced them. This study is not meant to generalize cities or the experiences of city dwellers. Rather, it is a method of learning about the city by looking back at the journey one has taken; no two journeys can be the same. In analyzing this journey objectively, I have noticed several trends, which may apply to others' experiences in Cambridge or other cities:

This ordering presents urban landscapes roughly from smallest to largest, with there being gray area among systems 2-4. They are arranged in order from closest to home, to furthest away. The transition from the personal to the communal opens the home out to the greater world within and beyond the city; in the case of the private landscape, it is the first transition from indoors to outdoors. These landscapes in the early part of the hierarchy are inhabited by familiar people, such as family and neighbors, while the later landscapes are full of strangers, possibly from other cities or towns.

These categories also vary by the method of transportation and the speed at which it travels, which has a considerable effect on the feeling of being there. Landscapes further along the hierarchy feature transportation methods that are faster moving, perhaps a reflection of

the nature of life at that phase. For example, a small neighborhood park would be walked through—perhaps with a few bikes—while a riverside park may be passed by cars and many more bikes traveling at higher speeds along its edge.

The increased energy of these places is also reflected in the physical fragmentation of forms. While landscapes such as public parks, are more self-contained (often completely contained by fencing), landscapes at the edge of the city are often divided as a result of the flow and intersections of foot and vehicle traffic. Thus, the energy of a landscape influences its structure; a careful reading of an image alone can offer many clues to its location.

All of these factors are explored in my paintings—the final product of this thesis. Working at the intersection of art, architecture, and urban studies has proved to be an enlightening method of working. I started with subjective impressions of sites, and then used research about those sites to further justify or modify those artworks. By building a stronger knowledge base on the subjects of landscapes and cities, I was able to create and select for images that would tell a story about a concept—such as drainage—and encourage viewers to look more closely at sites in person. The identification of a hierarchy of landscapes provided a logical basis for how to curate the artwork.

In the following sections, I elaborate further on each of the landscape systems identified above and provide specific examples in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I engage discourses in landscape architecture and urban studies to better understand how these sites have been imagined, constructed, and inhabited. I use this as an opportunity to introduce sites which are later presented as artistic explorations.

LANDSCAPE SYSTEMS

PRIVATE LANDSCAPES

My home back yard is sixteen feet wide and twenty six and half feet long. It is enclosed by my house, a large parking lot, and a hardware store garage, with a decent fence provided by the adjacent apartment building. The property is elevated by landfill, so that the house does not lie on the same plane as the parking lot. About a century ago, when the house was built, what is now a concrete plain of compact cars was then a group of horse stables. The land that the neighborhood is built upon is mostly clay, so it is difficult to garden and has become home to the more resilient plant species.¹⁰ At the edges of the garden, ivy has spread out right up to the fence. It chokes up the rest of the plants, save for a few red tulips in spring.

The grass in the yard, though it is seeded and tended to in the springtime by my father, is rarely used for entertaining. In summer, it is lush and mostly concealed by the leafy surrounding trees, but it is rarely occupied. It can be unpleasant to sit outside there, because of the constant noise of the cars from the road and the parking lot. Occasionally, the garbage trucks will come and empty the dumpsters in the parking lot, and the whole event can be seen and heard from the backyard. In fact, places at the boundaries—of a house, backyard, or neighborhood—are often the most enticing to children.¹¹ In the case of my own backyard, it was always exciting to catch glimpses at strangers getting in and out of their cars through the

¹⁰ I learned this from urban historian Sam Bass Warner during his class visit to the MIT course “The Once and Future City” this spring.

¹¹ Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self* (Berwick: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 1995) , 28.

fencing of the backyard.

The back yard I have described, despite its apparent openness to the surrounding area, is a very spiritual place and remains private even if only by ideology. In it are two white statuettes—one of cat, which I won at a raffle in grade school, and the second of a smiling Buddha, a reflection of our Chinese-American heritage (Figure 5). This is where, as long as I can remember, the ashes of our pets have been scattered. I imagine them giving life to this place, bound by asphalt and concrete, but completely hidden from the busy street and the hundreds of strangers who live in the apartment complexes just feet away. This openness is much different from the suburban backyard, which either opens up into a woodland area, or has visibility among neighbors who know each other.

I always imagined my backyard as being much larger than it is, perhaps because of the suburban expectation of the backyard as a wide-open place to run around. In suburban areas, there is more emphasis on the acreage of a property, whereas in the city the concept of land ownership is more focused on the resources that the area has, such as universities, museums, and proximity to transportation. Yet, the urban backyard still has value. It might be considered a vestigial form of the suburban backyard, even though the city predates the suburbs. The mowed lawn is a sign of wealth, indicative of leisure, rather than of toiling outside for a livelihood.¹² The urban backyard, then, might be considered an effort to recreate these idyllic lawns and gardens, but at a smaller scale—an attempt to have the best of both urban and suburban lifestyles.

¹² Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 54-55.

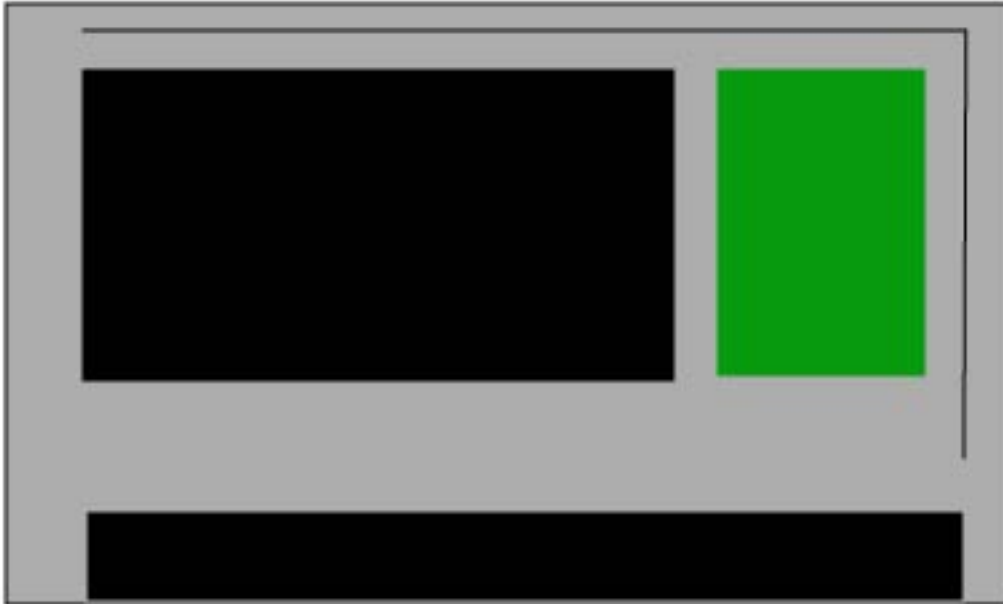


Figure 4. Diagram of a private landscape.



Figure 5. Buddha statue, ivy, and tulips (May 2012).



Figure 6. My backyard in Cambridge (May 2012).



Figure 7. My backyard in Cape Cod (May 2012).

Gardening itself is a ritual that makes the city feel more like the suburbs.¹³ Even houses right near traffic may have flowerpots, built-in planters, or wind chimes. Gardening activities may occur right on the street where air pollution is the worst, a contradiction to the idea that going outside to garden will get one some fresh air. The urban front yard is not so much a private landscape as the backyard, but rather is more to improve the impression of its property. Because many single-family homes are right on the sidewalk, they usually have a modest front garden, if any at all. These front gardens are subject to the abuse of passersby and are not usually not pleasant to inhabit because of the pollution and traffic. These lawns, in addition to being small, often line up with the lines of the sidewalk pavement. Homes I have observed in north and west Cambridge in the springtime often have beautiful flowers, small trimmed bushes, and sometimes fencing. More congested areas of the city, such as east Cambridge, lack these front yards and often the doorway is right at the edge of the sidewalk.

Despite the obvious problem of lack of space, the private landscapes of cities have a different sort of richness; they are steeped in the many physical and historical layers of the city. They are significant as the only precious “land” that is privately owned by a family in the city. Cambridge is a city of approximately thirty percent homeowners and sixty percent renters, a proportion which is becoming more imbalanced.¹⁴ Private urban landscape in Cambridge are becoming rarities. Because they are often hidden, they have a secrecy about that that makes them personal.

¹³ I feel the need to acknowledge community gardening in cities as another approach. This chapter considers only privately owned land.

¹⁴ “1993 Cambridge Growth Management Document,” City of Cambridge Planning Board and Community Development Department, 2007, accessed May 16, 2012. <http://www2.cambridgema.gov/cdd/cp/zng/growthpol/>.

While I did envy friends and relatives—from the surrounding suburbs of Winchester, Lexington, Hanover, and Middleboro—who had their own backyards with swing sets, swimming pools, and trampolines, I found the city to be equally exciting. As I grew older, those friends and relatives in turn envied fun stores and venues, as well as university resources. And of course, it is advantageous to play outside without the threat of deer ticks and lyme disease, which have afflicted friends living in the suburbs of the South Shore. That being said, I have always been attracted to the suburban backyard. It is hard to say which is “better”, but the general trend of increasing urban populations around the world highlights the importance of this alternative solutions for cultivating private landscapes and creating and maintaining public spaces.

Cambridge is one of the densest cities in the United States which limits the amount of land an individual homeowner can have, and restricts them from developing in any one direction.¹⁵ The existence of many group living arrangements—even in more affluent areas of the city—places an emphasis upon shared spaces rather than private backyards. The lack of space in private urban landscapes is an extra incentive for exploring other parts of the city, and accelerates the transition from the private, family world to the greater community of the city.

¹⁵ Ibid.

NEIGHBORHOOD LANDSCAPES

My perception of Cambridge has been strongly influenced by Mayor Danehy Park, which remains one of my favorite places in the city. At fifty acres, it is the largest green space in the city, yet it is mostly unknown away from this part of Cambridge.¹⁶ While open to the public, it primarily serves the immediate residential area and its elementary schools.

Never having been to natural fields as a child, the park seemed infinite and timeless, full of diverse wildlife and climes. Its wetland area has cattails, weeping willows, and tadpoles—species which I had never seen anywhere else. I associated it with the woodland regions of fantasy books and movies, truly believing that their anthropomorphized characters lived there. A bit older, I would go to simply walk around in it as a refuge, sometimes using it as the subject or setting for high school photography projects. When I started to more actively travel across the city, the park became reduced to a space to be crossed and was dwarfed by the surrounding homes, train tracks, and commercial properties.

Today, Danehy is collage of natural and built systems which reflects almost two hundred years of human intervention.¹⁷ Before settlement, it was a swamp—as was most of the Boston area before it was filled for development. The site’s rich clay deposits attracted attention, and the resources were exploited as part of the brick industry in northwest Cambridge; the office building across the street from it on its eastern boundary is appropriately named “The Brick

¹⁶ "Danehy Park," Cambridge Department of Human Services, accessed December 14, 2011, <http://www2.cambridgema.gov/dhsp2/danehy.cfm>

¹⁷ Maps going back to 1854 label the former swamp area’s clay resources. “Map of the City of Cambridge, Middlesex County, Massachusetts,” Henry Francis Walling, 1854, accessed May 17, 2012, <http://maps.bpl.org/id/12775>.

Yard”. After the collapse of that industry, the site was used as a landfill until the early 1970s. Twenty years later, the site was reclaimed as a recreational space and since has been a great asset to the neighborhood. The contours of the now beautiful park are very telling: while evocative of a bucolic landscape scene, they are composed of buried, gradually subsiding landfill deposits. Like many neighborhood landscapes, the asphalt pathways of Danehy Park have a sinuous quality, which counteracts the strong geometries of urban development and is evocative of the rural.¹⁸ This landscape in particular is loaded with inorganic materials, yet provides a favorable image.

The park in its current form links disparate areas. North Cambridge’s looming Rindge Towers—sometimes called “The Three Babies”—are large public housing complexes at the edge of the city: adjacent to railroad tracks, a shopping center, and the entrance to the highway. These brick towers are easy to see from several blocks away, especially through the Danehy Park (Figure 10). Growing up, I knew many classmates who lived there from countries such as Haiti, Barbados, China, and Pakistan. Though they were not immediate neighbors, we were grouped together by area code in school. It was reassuring to see where they lived since I had no neighbors on my busy street corner. Therefore, the openness of the park brings a sense of community even just visually. The landscape of Danehy demonstrates how something vast can act as a connective force¹⁹.

¹⁸ Jackson, 74.

¹⁹ Without the park, if the site were still a landfill, the Rindge Towers would feel more separate and excluded.

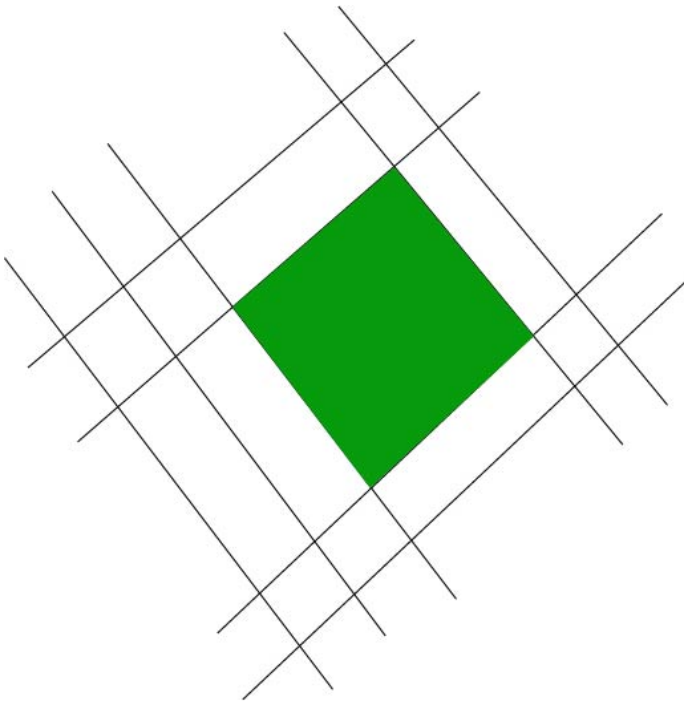


Figure 8. Diagram of a neighborhood landscape.

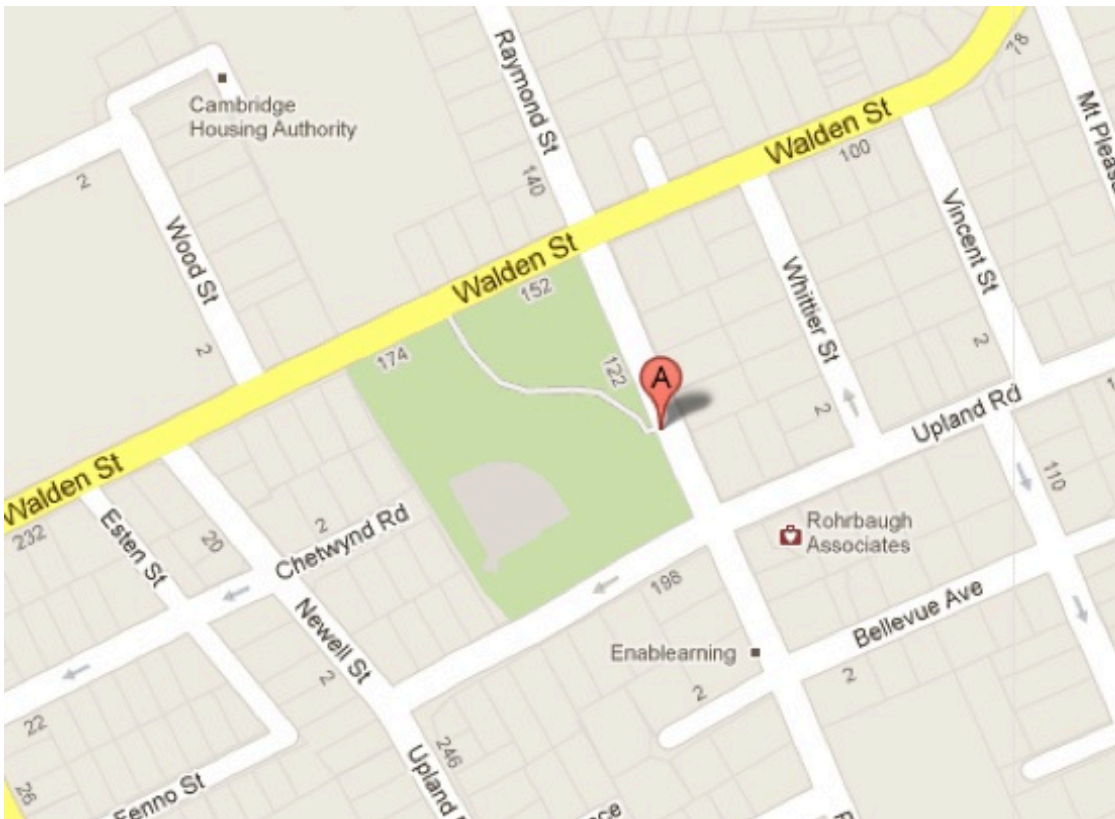


Figure 9. Map of the Raymond Park area, retrieved on May 22, 2012 from Google Maps.



Figure 10. Children rolling down hill at Danehy Park, with the Rindge Towers in the background (May 2012).



Figure 11. Dog walkers in the morning at Raymond Park (October 2011).

It is important for children to claim a “home-away-from-home”.²⁰ This is made more complex in shared landscapes such as neighborhood parks, where many people may have memories of the same parts. For example, rolling down the hill, sledding, or exploring the wetland area are all shared experiences which may be some of the neighborhood’s childrens’ first experiences developing a connection to spaces other than their homes. The vastness and variety of elements in these neighborhoods encourages exploration.²¹ It is not a concern to get lost, because the entire park is literally bound by fences. Parents can see children in the distance because the space is wide open and the grass is mowed short. In the landscape, communal activities like playing sports and flying kites are inviting and contribute to a positive image of the city. These activities engage both adults and children, gathering large groups of people. These types of activities are seasonal, but the parks are never empty. Dog walkers and joggers, for instance, can be seen all year long.

Several small neighborhood parks are scattered throughout Cambridge residential areas and act as small oases across the greater landscape of the city. These small parks, such as Raymond Park in northwest Cambridge, serve the same function as a plaza would in the heart of the city, with houses all facing toward it. The proximity of many of these landscapes to residential areas makes more likely that it will become a part of an individual’s daily life. Neighborhood landscapes might be walked through, for example, to go from home to a subway

²⁰ Clare Cooper Marcus discusses the importance of child created dwellings, which represent a child’s independence from home, development of self, etc...Children develop independence and exercise creativity by personalizing spaces. Marcus, 17-33.

²¹ A contradiction to the idea of open space as immediately welcoming is presented in Wendy Jacob’s “Explorers Club”: individuals with autism may be hesitant to go into these wide open spaces. However, visual cues like lines are helpful for navigation.

station. The establishment of individual routines like morning walks play a part in the claiming of these very young sites and the shaping of local and personal identity. As more people begin to respond to an urban landscape and as wildlife naturally becomes attracted to it, it becomes a new type of ecosystem.

Neighborhood landscapes are very easy to spot in an aerial view of the city. Though not always obvious when on site, aerial views reveal how closely they are fitted to the grid of the city. From these landscapes, there is greater visibility outward beyond the neighborhood. Because there are no buildings, there is a wide open view of the sky, which makes the world feel vast, opening the landscape up to the sky which inevitably connects the entire Earth. On a clear night, stars can be seen well. On a pleasant day, a blue sky with large cumulus clouds will feel more vast and spectacular than anywhere else in the city.

From the top of the hill at the center of Danehy Park, there is a view of the Boston skyline; this view is hardly visible anywhere else other than along the Charles River, which divides Cambridge and Boston.²² This awareness of context would be difficult to achieve in a dense neighborhood, even if far closer to Boston. Finding and re-experiencing this view have been revelatory experiences and the process has become ritualistic. When I was little, I liked to ride to the top of the hill and then roll down with no breaks, never noticing the skyline; what was more important to me then, was finding my house in the skyline. But today, I am more aware of the smallness of the city, and of the park's context within the city, the city's context within the world. The park's significance has changed with me as I aged. First, I was sucked into its vastness and mystery, and later, it served as a platform to the rest of the city.

²² A hilltop is an example of a "secondary vantage point", which might "suggest extensions of the field of vision which are panoramic in character". Appleton, 82.

COURTYARD LANDSCAPES

All through elementary school, the neighborhood I have described was my whole universe. I later began to connect it to the greater city, walking to places to which I had only once been driven; in general, I do not fully understand places in context to one another until going by myself and seeing them on maps. I walked most frequently to my high school, which was mile and a half a way from home—too close to bother to take a bus, but significantly far to walk twice a day. There were many possible paths to get from northwest Cambridge to Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in mid-Cambridge, which is a couple blocks from Harvard Yard. To avoid walking on the busy Massachusetts Avenue, I used to walk through Harvard Law School campus.

Despite the renown of the school, and the many associations it brings, the campus struck me as especially calm. Pathways crisscross the lawn, from which a large, healthy looking grid of trees towers over the buildings. While a large open space, it is very shaded; the surrounding buildings and branches above enclose the space. This sub-campus of Harvard University is not as grand as Harvard Yard—in fact, this “identity crisis” spurred the construction of a new building.²³

The campus of Harvard Law School is far less busy because it lies apart from the commotion of Harvard Square and the university’s undergraduates. Its students are dressed formally, walking and talking more stoically. There are no tourists. The landscape of this campus

²³ The construction of Harvard Law School’s newest building in 2011 has dramatically changed the feeling of the area compared to the landscape I have discussed here. Robert Campbell, “Solving an identity crisis”, *The Boston Globe*, February 10, 2008, accessed May 16, 2012, http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2008/02/09/solving_an_identity_crisis/?page=full

gently transitions the center of the university into Porter Square, a commercial area which links to the neighboring City of Somerville.

The City of Cambridge is strongly affected by the presence of its large universities. Though a relatively small city, it contains two of the most prestigious and recognizable educational institutions in the world; the landscapes of Harvard and MIT inevitably blend physically with the rest of the city. While most universities have courtyards and vast lawns, between buildings, this is especially significant in urban universities. These wide areas of open space—even if hidden by buildings and walls—are placed in juxtaposition with a greater area that is dense and commercial. Despite the prevalence of Georgian architecture and sprawling lawns in universities across the United States, Harvard University is noteworthy as a connection among Harvard Square, Porter Square, and other centers in Cambridge and Boston. Though its courtyards are not owned by the city, they inevitably influence circulation at a greater level and serve a population beyond the university.

Courtyard landscapes range from vast imposing quadrants like MIT's Killian Court (Figure 13) to intimate, public gardens like Harvard's Dudley Garden (Figure 15), a small garden a few feet from Massachusetts Avenue, separated by a brick wall and vegetation. These courtyards exist at different scales and for different purposes, but both have the quality of being hidden to various degrees²⁴. While hidden from view, they are easy to access if one knows where to enter. If they can be seen at all from the street, it is usually just a glimpse; the amount of courtyard one sees changes by walking around the buildings. After walking in, one is surrounded almost entirely by buildings; the site feels like its own separate universe nested

²⁴ MIT's Killian Court is completely open to the Charles River, even visible from the Boston shoreline. Otherwise, it is very much hidden from the Cambridge side of the river.

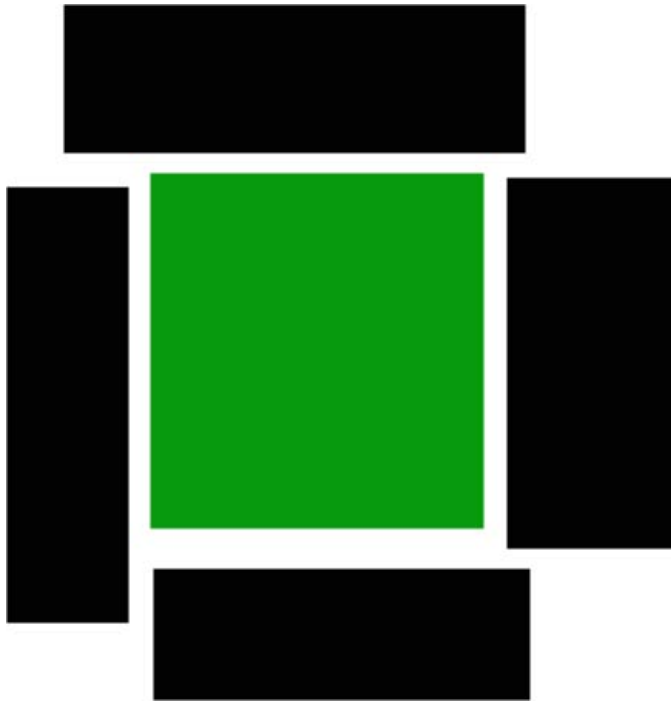


Figure 12. Diagram of a courtyard landscape.



Figure 13. MIT's Killian Court (March 2012).



Figure 14. View into the Harvard Quadrangle (October 2011).



Figure 15. Path of Harvard's Dudley Garden (May 2012).

within the framework of the university, and as an outer layer, the city as a whole. At the center of a landscape like Harvard Yard, one feels completely separate from the surrounding areas.

People trickle in and out of the courtyard from one of its several openings. Once inside, movement is choreographed by walkways, which lead from one building to another; often, paths converge to important buildings like libraries. The atmosphere is peaceful, given that there is only foot traffic. Therefore, stepping back out onto the main street may be a jarring experience. Yet schematically, the walkways' traffic makes them like roads, with varying business depending on the time of day. These paths can be thinner and more windy where there is no scheduled traffic.²⁵

While open to the public to a degree, these courtyard landscapes are not really public gathering spaces. Some of the grass in Harvard Yard, for example, is roped off. The presence of universities themselves imposes on the city, and is a sign of prestige. Campus lawns themselves are compared to luxurious carpets.²⁶ When it is quiet, the feeling of trespassing can be an exciting thing. One example is my memory of when my elementary school gym class was released to play across the street in the Harvard Quadrangle (Figure 14). Because it was concealed from the street, it felt like a completely new, hidden place. I was never really aware it was *Harvard*, just as protected but interesting place to explore, which was relatively close to home. Its quietness, vastness, and secrecy made it enticing.

It is significant that these courtyard landscapes, at least those of Harvard and MIT, did not exist before the schools were established—their existence is tied to the existence of the

²⁵ Richard P. Dober, *Campus Design* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1992), 212

²⁶ *Ibid*, 185.

associated university. Old photos of the construction of Harvard Business School, for instance, show how barren the campus was before the lawns were established.²⁷ Trees are often in distinctive, geometrical arrangements. For example, the Harvard Quadrangle has two large, round trees which frame the space and can be easily seen from a bird's eye view.

These planted trees provide the framework for a new ecosystem. Squirrels in Harvard Yard have become iconic to the Harvard campus, specifically to these courtyard landscapes.²⁸ In fact, the way in which these courtyard landscapes are protected from street pollution—at least more so than the street—makes them a good place to sit.²⁹ In a way, these courtyards—and even urban backyards and public parks—function as self-contained ecosystems, almost like fish tanks. Their sense of isolation from the city is similar to the previously discussed private and neighborhood landscapes, yet they remain more fully in the public sphere.

²⁷ Ibid, 55.

²⁸ “Harvard Squirrel Archive,” updated November 28, 2010, accessed May 16, 2012, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/phall/harvard_squirrel_archive.html.

²⁹ It can sometimes be taken for granted how much pollution is on the street. In *The Granite Garden*, street trees are cited as one method to protect residents from pollution. Here, I speculate that a courtyard blocked by both buildings *and* trees would be especially safe from air pollution. Anne Whiston Spirn. *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 71.

SHORELINE LANDSCAPES

Often, with the coming of spring comes a new life for urban landscapes. During the warm weather months, Memorial Drive—a major road that hugs the edge of the Charles River—is shut down on Sundays to accommodate roller blading, biking, and other recreational activities. While invisible to drivers most of the time, the riverbank becomes a place for tanning, reading, and picnicking. In early June, it is the site for the Cambridge River Festival, an annual arts and cultural celebration which takes over both the road and the riverbank. One can find tents with food from many cultures, performers in vivid costume, live music, and participatory art projects. The green space between the road and river is transformed from a merely decorative element for Memorial Drive to a lively place of community and diversity.

The flow of people down Memorial Drive is viscous and ever changing. I remember seeing someone I knew disappear into the crowd, and following my neighbor to the shoreline, which was covered in rose petals. There were strangers with elaborate makeup and dyed hair who played techno music for crowds dancing in the summer rain. The presence of the river's water was stronger being next to it during the rain, and it felt like the river might spill onto the shore. Being close to the river, rather than seeing it from a distance, made it feel more engaging as a force of nature.

Such engagement with these landscapes takes the participant out of the realm of the every day city—they become new places to explore, rather than places to pass by or through. Shoreline spectacles like the River Festival, sailing regattas, and the 4th of July Fireworks begin

and then disappear quickly like dreams and return again with the arrival of the warm weather.³⁰ Likewise, in the winter months, the often frozen water and dead grass indicates a lack of activity—as if the whole shoreline were in hibernation.

For a small city, Cambridge has two substantial bodies of water—the Charles River and Fresh Pond. Each predates human settlement in this area, as they were the products of glacial movement. In true wilderness, the permanence of landscape features is only affected by large scale geologic events—such as the end of an Ice Age—but in cities, man-made developments can occur at an extraordinarily fast pace.

Fresh Pond was used as a source for the ice industry, but it was converted to a recreational space after the Civil War, when the “moral” nature of the outdoors was greatly valued in a rapidly industrializing world.³¹ Local government also limited the types of activities permitted at Fresh Pond by building fences and banning ice skating, swimming, and boating as an effort to preserve the pond.³² This makes it a quieter, calmer place compared to the Charles River, which is more open to activity. Yet, activities occur around the pond even if not in it, which constrains it and adds another layer to the landscape.

Over time, these shorelines became emphasized by the development of infrastructure along them. Shorelines are more and more engineered—and therefore, artificial—the closer they are to highly populated areas. The Charles River starts out west in Hopkinton, where it can

³⁰ Urban planner and author Kevin Lynch proposed that “we take pleasure in distinctive events, as in distinctive places”. The pleasure of these shoreline spectacles is partially due to the fact that they “enlarge our sense of the present”. Lynch, Kevin. *What Time Is This Place?* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972. 83-89. Print.

³¹ Jill Sinclair, *Fresh Pond: The History of a Cambridge Landscape*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 57.

³² *Ibid*, 71.

be seen with natural wetlands. Before the river's flow reaches the Boston Harbor, a comprehensive damming system and sea walls protect the urban shorelines of Cambridge and Boston.³³

On perfectly carved out spaces, such as the Esplanade and Memorial Drive—the shorelines of the Charles River—the water is much easier to enjoy. People can picnic on short grass, whereas it would be impossible to sit around the edge of the Charles with tall reeds and animal life. In that sense, the shore of the Charles functions more like a beach than its native swampy river. These shorelines are different from the wetlands that originally bridged land and water—today the landscape is contained and maintained. Shorelines are easier to walk along with shorter grass and paths, as compared to the wet mud, pooled water, and tall reeds of the natural environment; these would seem alien to the modern day Cantabridgian or Bostonian.

Children in the city often cannot get to the water alone³⁴. It might be at the boundary of the city, away from the immediate home or neighborhood environment, or otherwise difficult access because big infrastructure must be crossed first (Figures 18 and 19). In considering the order of landscapes experienced at the beginning of this thesis: shoreline landscapes might present inconsistencies in the order proposed, which may be accounted for by parents or teachers accompanying a child to a scenic area. In the case of Fresh Pond, it is challenging to get to due to a rotary and construction on the busy street. At the edge of the shoreline landscape, the energy of the surrounding infrastructure is intense, but once inside the landscape of Fresh Pond, the trees along the pond protect it from the road.

³³ Hall, 38.

³⁴ An exception in Cambridge is the residential area along the Charles River, which is sometimes called "Coast" by local teenagers.

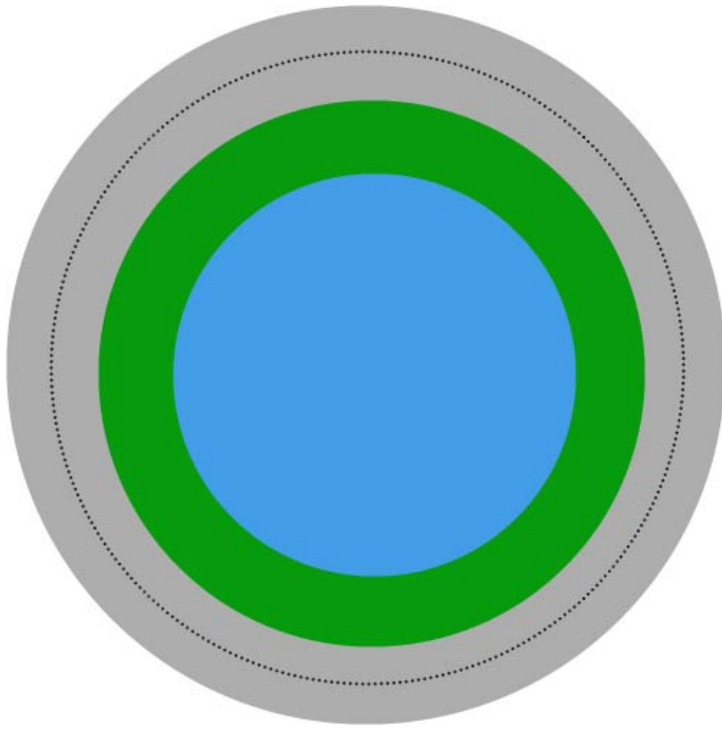


Figure 16. Diagram of a shoreline landscape.



Figure 17. View of the Boston skyline, looking from MIT (October 2011).



Figure 18. Traffic along the Charles River (May 2012).



Figure 19. Traffic along Fresh Pond (October 2011).

At the edge of the water—anywhere—there is a sense of a greater world beyond where one is. Just as windows open rooms in a house out to the greater world, bodies of water provide a release from the congestion of the city. Water and plant life snake out into the distance—to the ocean or further inland³⁵. Standing on an urban shoreline, everything moves quickly—bicycles, cars, trains, and boats.

Tagging along on a sailboat on the Charles River completely changed my perception of the river. Looking across the Charles, from either side, the river seems quite flat and small compared to the buildings. But when at the center of the river on a boat—especially as the sailboat has the body just a few feet away from the water—the water is more dynamic and enveloping. I felt especially tiny compared to the city, as if the waves and wind could easily overtake the sailboat. Rather than feeling linear and parallel, the two shorelines composed a panorama. Thus, one's position along or within a body of water may have a strong effect on spatial perception³⁶. In this case, the dynamism of the river made the once purely picturesque Boston skyline into a highly physical experience which made me feel the full scope of the city and the Boston area's geography.

³⁵ A winding river is an example of a “deflected vista”, a framed view in which continuing channels of vision which have become slightly bent, so that continuity of perception cannot be achieved instantaneously but only serially”. Appleton, 82-83.

³⁶ In this case, the view from was an “aquatic surface” and is a true panorama. It is important to note, in contrast, the notion of the “interrupted panorama”, where a given view may contain elements which obstruct parts of a landscape, but still allow the perception of the complete image; this is especially noteworthy in cities and reflected in the collection of paintings produced through this thesis. The various types of views are outlined in Jay Appleton's *Experience of Landscape*. Appleton, 77-79.

EXIT LANDSCAPES

It is easy to feel trapped by the city, and it is not always obvious how to leave, or even, where the city actually ends. The Alewife area of Cambridge, the city's northwest boundary, is an interesting place where the city starts to dissolve. Alewife Station in Cambridge, the last stop on the subway, is the starting point for two exit landscapes: the Minuteman Bikeway and Route 2, which both connect the city of Cambridge to the western suburbs.

It is complicated and dangerous to travel by bike from my neighborhood to the Minuteman Bikeway, a scenic eleven mile commuter bike rail which leads from the city to mid-Massachusetts.³⁷ First, I get onto my street—which is two-way, but very narrow—and then take a left onto another busy street which leads to Route 2, the highway that leads out of the city into the suburbs west of Cambridge. Instead of merging onto the highway with the cars, a biker takes a concrete ramp that runs parallel. Following this ramp downward, it then leads to a path which circles under the highway overpass, and then north around the train station (Figure 21). From there, the bikeway begins, at first parallel to the highway, and then branching off into a residential area.

My first trip through part of the Minuteman Bikeway was the first time I had ever left the city westbound other than in a car. I cycled out without thinking at all of where to go, and when I checked a photo I had taken on my phone, I realized I had crossed two towns over into Lexington, Massachusetts. The path, a tunnel of green, extends outward to the west. After cycling away through this tunnel, without any plan of how far to go, I turned back as I got tired and the sun began to set.

³⁷ "Bikeway Basics," accessed May 16, 2012, <http://www.minutemanbikeway.org/Pages/basics.html>.

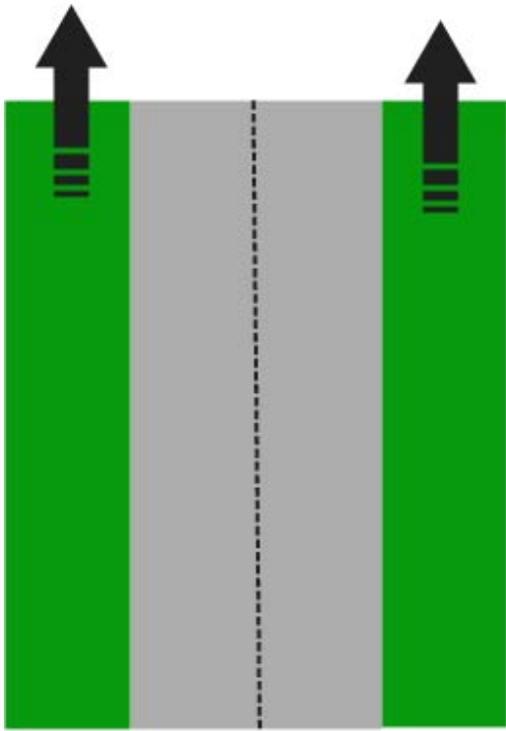


Figure 20. Diagram of an exit landscape.



Figure 21. Ramp diverting bike and foot traffic from Route 2 (October 2011).



Figure 22. Intersection within the Minuteman Bikeway (October 2011).



Figure 23. Massachusetts Route 6 (May 2012).

People take both the bikeway and the highway to get from suburban homes to their jobs in the city. The Minuteman Bikeway is used almost exclusively by adults walking or biking to get to Alewife Train Station to go to work in the morning. This landscape is definitely a place of adults, not children; a crowd of strangers with business suits and briefcases traveling in parallel either in or out of the city is far different from the imagery discussed in the early descriptions of neighborhood landscapes. The end of the subway is an eerie place; it is like the end of the universe for the city dweller. The train reverses direction and goes back into the city, but new paths are introduced.

The highway reflects an American history of rapid, large-scale development and an emphasis on suburban life; railroads were the first forms of infrastructure that connected new towns and cities.³⁸ The Minuteman Bikeway and highways are significant as links between the suburban and urban centers of Massachusetts. The path of Minuteman Bikeway's was once a railroad itself, but is now modernized for recreation and access to the subway.³⁹

Both the highway and bike trail provide the closest mostly populous collection of trees near the city. They are also connections to genuinely natural landscapes. Along the Minuteman Bikeway, there are natural landscapes such as Alewife Brook Reservation, Spy Pond and the Great Meadows, which are less shaped by human interaction compared to the living environments in the city. There are also commercial stops, such as Arlington Center, which represents a break in the bike trail. There are places to stop for refreshments, sometimes a man with bike repair services near Spy Pond. By far the most famous destination, Walden Pond in

³⁸ Jackson, 20.

³⁹ "The Minuteman Bikeway," accessed May 16, 2012, <http://www.minutemanbikeway.org/Pages/intro.html>

Concord, is iconic of the writer Henry David Thoreau, who himself represents ideals of the American outdoors.

While the destinations themselves are important, the routes in between are less distinctive. Landscaping on the highway is monotonous after a while because the highway goes on for so long without much variation. The strips of trees on either side of the road have little identity; these boundaries on either side of the road are solely meant to structure the pathway and block the commotion of the vehicles from the residential areas on either side. The land is untouchable and alien. The highways of New England are distinctive as wooded, as compared to the vast and desolate highways of the southwest. The bikeway and the highway have the same structure but at different scales—one moves in a vehicle along pavement, surrounded by strips of landscaping on either side; this combination is what I call an “exit landscape”

These landscapes—the Minuteman Bike Trail, as well as highways in general, are symbolic. The one-point perspective provides a feeling of infinite travel, and a sense of optimism as one looks toward the horizon. This aesthetic may be symbolic of an uncharted journey with limitless potential. The use of one-point perspective in painting, photography, and film is inexhaustible, and especially powerful if associated with a grand narrative.⁴⁰ For me, the bike trail in particular is symbolic of leaving the city: growing up, setting out on my own, and breaking from the familiarity of Cambridge. And so, the city once felt infinite in my backyard, then infinite in its public spaces. After those landscapes shrank in context of the city, the world gained a new sense of infinity as these exit landscapes lead outward.

⁴⁰ One point perspective was developed on a mathematical basis in the Renaissance. In modern film, it is commonly used to suggest a journey. For example, a railroad extends into the distance as characters in the film *O Brother Where Art Thou* begin their *Odyssey*-inspired journey.

FORM FINDING PROCESS & ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

Capturing the sublimity of this personal journey through urban landscapes, while simultaneously conveying objective and globally relevant observations, was a challenging but rewarding process. My goal was to produce a body of work that clearly conveyed the journey I have described, and that reflected the beauty of these urban landscapes and their distinctly modern forms.

This desire is rooted in my frustration of the polarity of nature and urban imagery, which I would like to see bridged more optimistically yet practically. The work of nineteenth century artists such as those of the Hudson River School—which is iconic and associated with the term “landscape”—is not as relevant today⁴¹. Through this work, I wanted to call attention to a less obvious kind of beauty, which would reflect current conditions but also empower people who have grown up in, or are living in cities.

To begin, I went around the city by bicycle as a primary survey to re-experience the sites and begin to observe them more objectively. I took many notes in a journal over the course of this thesis project. At first, I took reference photos that conveyed mostly the vastness of the urban landscapes which I remembered as a child. I was also immediately drawn to places where there was a sharp juxtaposition between what appeared to be a natural environment, and a decidedly industrial area. In capturing these landscapes, I was careful not to get too caught up in the photography—site, context, and perspective were most important. I used only the iPhone camera—often I did not plan to take photos so it was good to be ready any time. An

⁴¹ The work of the Hudson River School, a group of artists who “took up residence” in New York state’s Hudson Valley portrayed the American landscape romantically. Appleton 37-38

image that was too dense was distracting—the least detailed photos (printed low quality, black and white) were the most useful and allowed for the more artistic freedom.

In developing these forms, I took several roles—as a photographer, architect, and artist. The diverse materials I used to produce images reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the research conducted. I traced over site photographs to distinguish the inorganic from the organic: I first traced the inorganic elements, such as asphalt pathways and stop signs, and then on a separate piece of paper painted the organic elements, such as trees and soil. This process became iterative. When I had the final images on trace paper, I began to see which landscapes were more interesting, beautiful, and informative on their own; that is, which really qualified as *landscapes* rather than *landscaping*. For example, in painting, I found continuous flat lawns to be uninteresting, and images that were too cluttered were illegible.

While there was some subjectivity involved—mainly, the blending of colors and usage of texture—I aimed to keep the process very consistent. This process of form generation could be used by anyone, anywhere. My adoption of the idea that the process, rather than the art object, is most important, was inspired by, and no better represented by the artist Sol Lewitt. The directions for how to create one of his works are often in the titles, for example “Wall Drawing 365: A square divided horizontally and vertically into four equal parts, each with a progressively darker gradation of gray” (1984). Numerous works by Lewitt were created by teams of artists executing his instructions. In this tradition, I hope that this process of form generation might be used by artists, architects, and planners alike as a method of site analysis.



Figure 24. Step 1: Print black and white site photo, adjust contrast on Photoshop beforehand if necessary.



Figure 25. Step 2: Place trace paper over image.

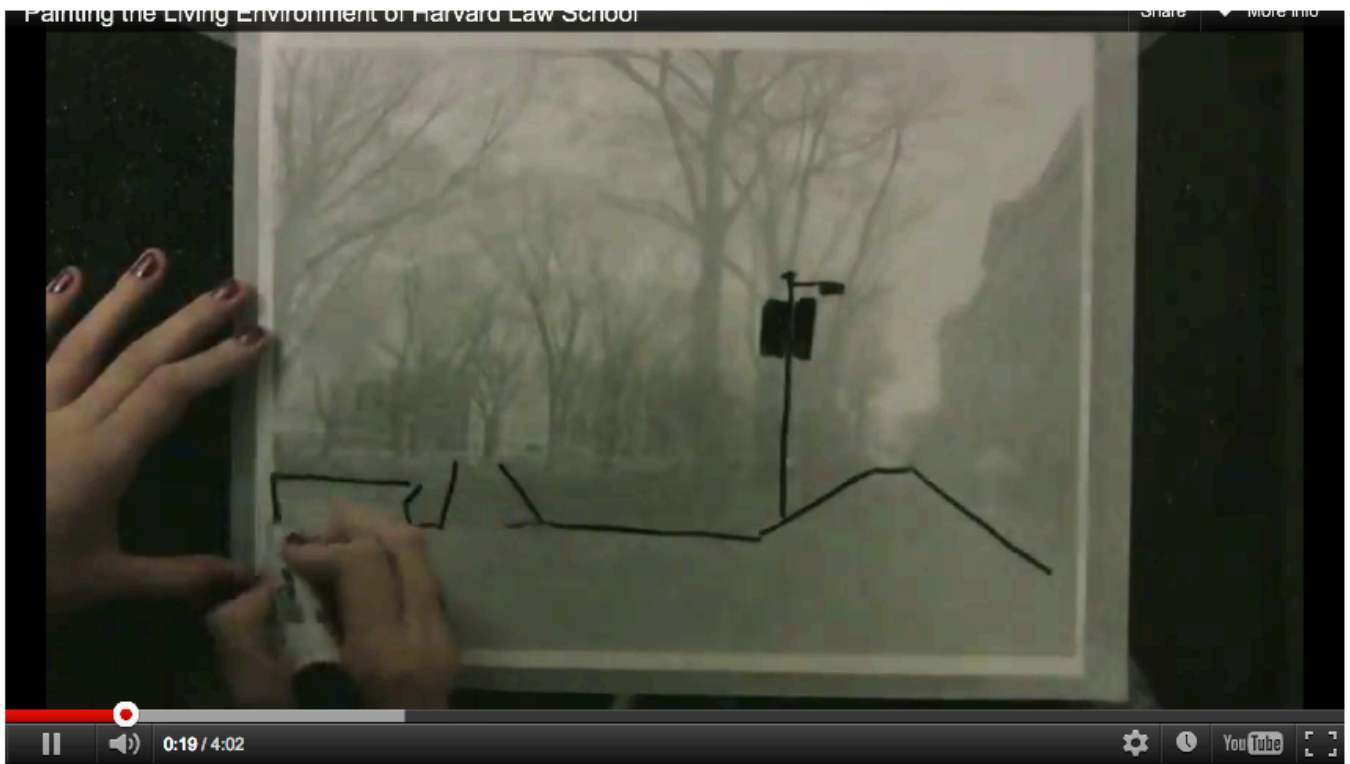


Figure 26. Step 3: Trace inorganic elements.



Figure 27. Step 4: Paint trees and other living elements, making sure not to drip onto previously traced areas.

After establishing this form finding process, I photographed the landscapes again, choosing compositions by imagining the final paintings. The process informed new parameters for site photography: The ideal photographs did not have too much empty space. They captured interesting geometries that were indicative of urban development patterns and processes. I focused on volumes rather than details; for example, the overall shape and position of a tree, rather than the exact likeness of hundreds of twigs and leaves. The most interesting images had a layering of inorganic and organic elements, which, when abstracted from one another, produced ambiguous yet understandable images.

Balancing legibility and expression became a major part of this artistic exploration. In my experience taking architecture studios, it was discouraged to be subjective or expressive in the plans. For example, I wanted to draw the movement of the water around a shoreline building to help understand the site, but I was told not to include it. This form finding process bridged those interests, using architectural drawing methods to establish a strong sense of space, but tapping into the qualities of paint to convey a landscape's dynamism.

The choices of paint and surface were also significant, contributing to the meaning of the artworks and strengthening their relation to the entire investigation. I chose watercolor to represent plant life, the soil the water moves through, as well as water itself. The trace paper painted on was susceptible to the application of water, yet durable enough to stay together. After drying, the trace paper revealed textures evocative of the flow of water. This wrinkling was obvious on the directly painted surfaces, but also affected the physical tension of the entire sheet of paper. Parts of the painting that remained blank—such as sections representing surfaces of asphalt—also produced wrinkles, though they were generally broader than those on

the painted surfaces. This wrinkling is evocative of the many natural processes that affect manmade materials—such as ice wedging and flooding. So, while collection of artwork overall echoes the separation of living landscapes from the built environment, these subtle wrinkles are a reminder that the forces of nature affect all aspects of cities.

The entire process of capturing these images and producing original artwork was more demanding than expected. I spent considerable time biking and walking from place to place, and visited most sites several times. My travels took me from the very edge of each side of the city: the side facing Boston, and the side leading to the suburbs. Part of the process was not just the time spent photographing, but also waiting for pleasant days (preferably overcast for a lack of shadows and ambient light rather than direct light) to walk or bike around the city. In the warmer weather, the landscapes were often filled with people, who I was careful not to disturb while taking photos. One of my sites—Harvard’s Dudley Garden, behind Lamont Library—was closed October through April, the majority of the academic year spent working on this thesis. While this was inconvenient, it made the experience of finally visiting especially exciting. And so, the very process of collecting images and observations by spending time on site was important for learning and reminding myself of the rhythms of the city.

The highly social and active nature of many of the landscapes explored in this thesis project made me question the emptiness of the images produced. Yet, it also felt very appropriate. The empty scenes I painted are reminiscent of the ending of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, a favorite illustrated book of mine. At the end of the book, the Little Prince disappears. The narrator is saddened, and presents two illustrations: one with the Little Prince, and a second one without him:

For me, this is the loveliest and saddest landscape in the world. It's the same landscape as the one on the preceding page, but I've drawn it one more time in order to be sure you see it clearly. It's here, that the little prince appeared on Earth, then disappeared.⁴²

In the same way that the Little Prince came through Earth in this story, I have, in a sense, disappeared from my hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In reexamining many meaningful, nostalgic sites over the course of the study this year, there became a sense of detachment. In the midst of intense observation and reminiscing, I realized that I am not so much present within them as I once was—it was almost like reentering those past experiences as a ghost. The production of these landscape paintings has been a journey in itself: it has, in a way, been a transition from my childhood and adolescent world, to my future.

⁴² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1943), 82-5.

INVENTORY OF WORKS



Figure 28. "My Backyard, Family Pet Cemetery".



Figure 29. "Mayor Danehy Park, Climbing Up the Landfill".



Figure 30. "Bergin Park, Getting Stung by a Wasp".



Figure 31. "Harvard Quadrangle, Playing Dodgeball at Recess".



Figure 32. "Raymond Park, Meeting for Photography Class".



Figure 33. "Harvard Law School, Walk to High School".



Figure 34. "MIT Courtyard (Behind Lobby 10), Exploring Campus".



Figure 35. "Harvard Dudley Garden, Studying in July".



Figure 36. "Charles River (MIT Campus Edge), Walking to Class".

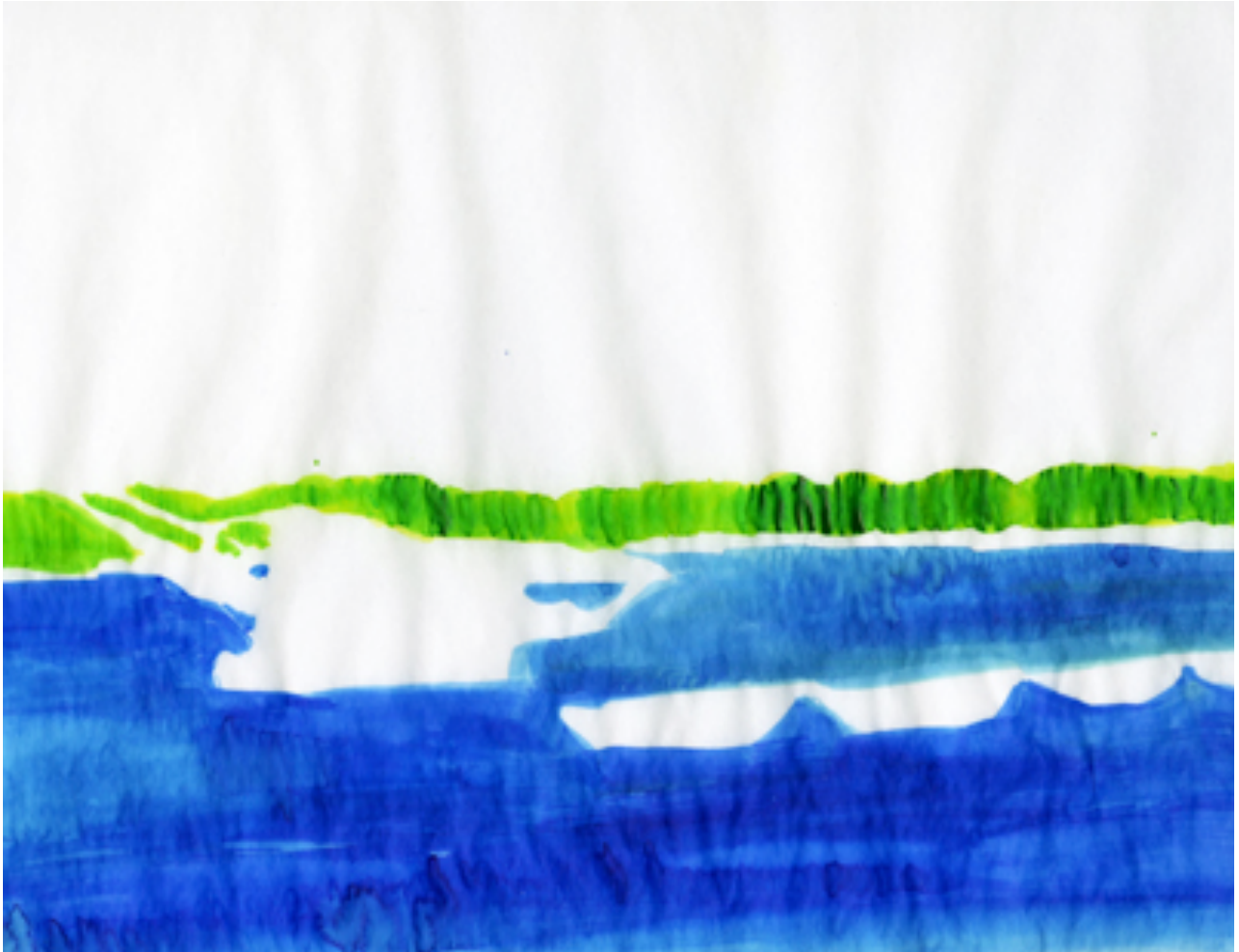


Figure 37. "Charles River, Catamaran Accident".



Figure 38. "Memorial Drive, Dancing on the Riverbank".



Figure 39. "Fresh Pond (Interior), Wondering About Life in the Woods".



Figure 40, "Fresh Pond (Edge), Leaving the Bike Path".

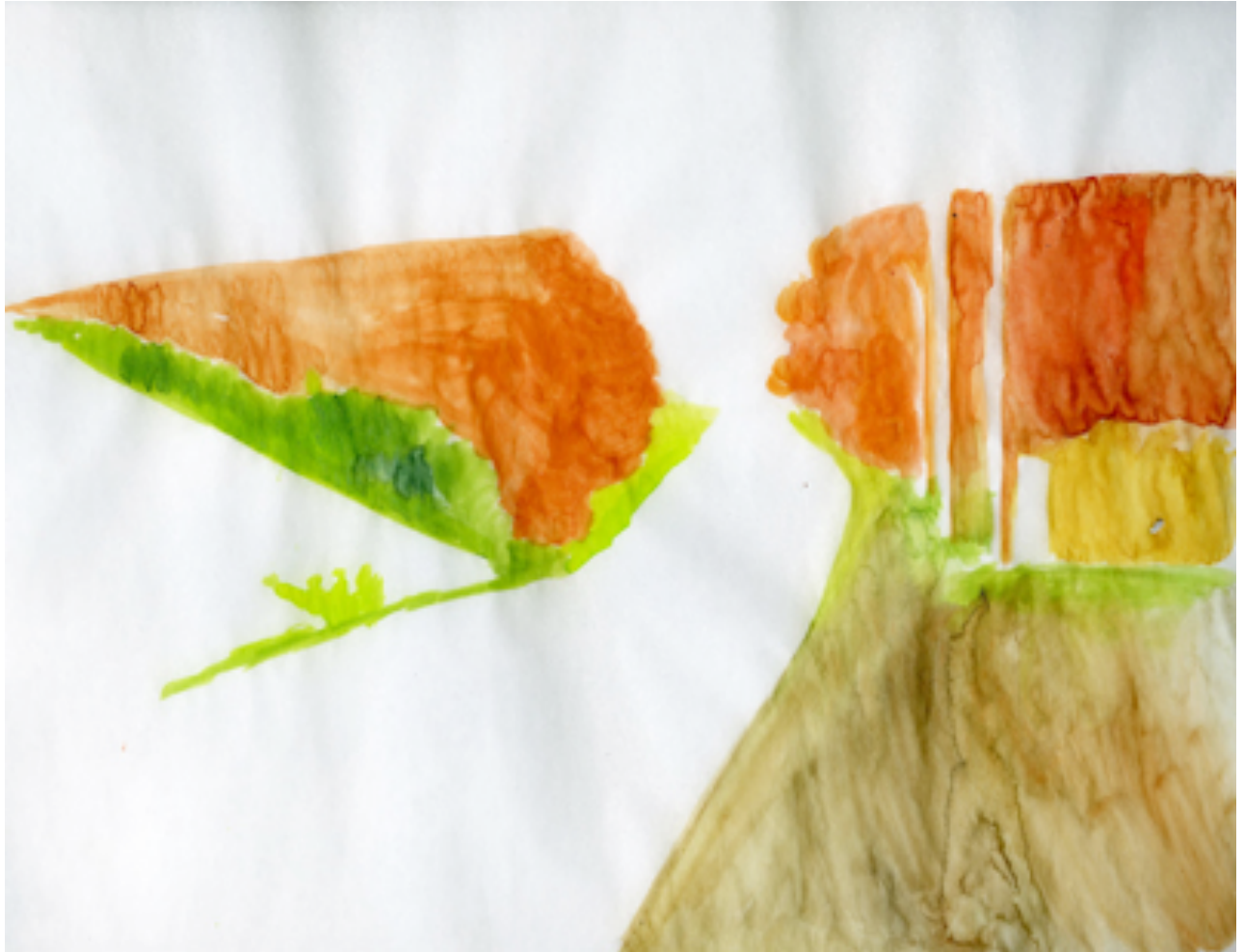


Figure 41. "Minuteman Bikeway (Entrance), Passing by Suburban Commuters".



Figure 42. "Mayor Danehy Park, Looking Over Neighborhood Skyline".



Figure 43. "Minuteman Bikeway (Middle), Cycling Away Until Getting Tired".

EXHIBITION

An exhibition of these pieces will be held June 1 –July 31 2012 at MIT’s Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning. The pieces will be presented in two staggered rows, which give the impression of movement in time forward, but also suggest an overlap among some of the sites. This structure is appropriate given the physical proximity of many of the places and the fact that I often visited many at overlapping times. I received a small grant to help cover the costs of show production.

Official exhibit description for MIT Libraries website:

Infinite Urban Landscapes: A Journey Through Cambridge, Massachusetts

Leah Brunetto

June 1 -July 31, 2012

Arranged in chronological order, the painted urban landscapes in this collection trace the artist's journey from her backyard to the edges of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Places such as public parks once felt physically infinite and natural in childhood, but are revealed as man-made and enclosed by the inorganic frameworks of the city. The level of fragmentation in each landscape increases along the timeline, reflecting the increased pace and complexity of life further away from home. These energetic forms lead to city exits such as highways, where one-point perspective reintroduces the notion of infinity.

While at first glance some of the featured landscapes appear natural, their artificiality is revealed by the geometries of elements such as fences, pavement, and bridges. The compositions were developed iteratively using digital photography and tracing to find the most dynamic forms and rhythms. Site photos were deconstructed literally into two different layers- inorganic and organic. The final images subtract the inorganic layers from the organic layers, resulting in a distinctly modern, urban aesthetic.

WEB PROJECT

In addition to the exhibition, I created a web version of the thesis, which is currently located at: <http://www.leahbrunetto.com/landscapes>.

The home page of the website is the main feature. Using a horizontal scrollbar (a JQuery plugin) the same collection is arranged in chronological order. The images, when clicked, lead to the Google Maps satellite view of the real landscape. From there, the visitor can locate the landscape, and, where possible, use the street view function to virtually enter or find instructions to visit in person. I often used Google Maps to look landscapes in context, as well as preview street views before revisiting to take reference photos. The website also includes a video, compressed from twenty-seven minutes into four minutes, which shows the entire process of creating a work.

This web project was used to present the thesis at the review, held on May 23, 2012. It was a very helpful tool, which enabled me to quickly go back and forth between photos, paintings, and general information, to the interface of Google Maps. The process of preparing the website to go along with press release for the exhibition forced me to think about how to condense the material far in advance of the review, and saved me the trouble of creating a different type of presentation.

Infinite Urban Landscapes:

A JOURNEY THROUGH CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Exhibit coming soon to the MIT Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning



Click an image in the sequence above to find the landscape's geographical location.

[ABOUT](#)

[LANDSCAPE SYSTEMS](#)

[VIDEO](#)

[THESIS TEXT](#)

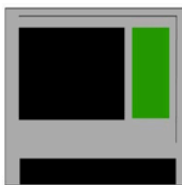
[CONTACT](#)

Figure 44. Screenshot of the website home page, an interactive timeline gallery.

Infinite Urban Landscapes:

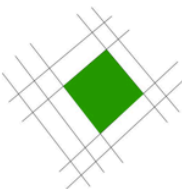
A JOURNEY THROUGH CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Exhibit coming soon to the MIT Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning



Private

Private landscapes include spaces such as backyards and gardens, which are enclosed by fences, homes, and other buildings. The urban backyard is a vestigial form of the suburban backyard. It is an attempt to recreate the idyllic lawns and gardens, but at a smaller scale.



Neighborhood

Neighborhood landscapes include public recreational spaces, often fitted to the grid of the immediate area. Many neighborhood parks in cities were converted into green space from other less desirable sites. **Mayor Danahy Park**, for example, was a landfill before it was transformed into a comprehensive recreational space.



Courtyard

Figure 45. Screenshot of an interior page outlining the landscape systems I defined.

CONCLUSION

This investigation spanned several disciplines: landscape architecture, visual art, urban studies, environmental science, cultural studies, geography, among others. The depth of the issues this thesis subject raised, as reflected by this wide range of disciplines, can account for my sustained and expanding interest in landscape studies. By studying these aspects of the idea of “landscape”, I came to better understand places that were important to me, what they have in common, and why they are significant. By identifying a hierarchy of landscapes systems specific to my experience, I developed ways to relate them to one another, as well as a basis for curating the associated artwork. In future studies, it would be interesting to see if these systems could be applied elsewhere: Are all five landscape systems present in every city? Which cities favor shoreline landscapes, as opposed to neighborhood landscapes?

In high school, it caught my attention when one student asked another: “Do you live in Coast?”, referring to the Riverside and Cambridgeport areas. While “Coast” is indeed along the Charles, it is hardly the picturesque image of a coastline—many residences are close to the busy and polluted Memorial Drive. This neighborhood’s colloquial name makes me think that perhaps, its residents may have an idyllic image of city’s landscapes similar to the way I did growing up. While drawing from autobiography provided plenty of material to explore this year, a more comprehensive study would include input from other Cambridge residents, particularly, children and adolescents, or adults who grew up in the city. I do not know, for example, if others who have grown up in Cambridge feel as strongly about its landscapes as I do. My attachments are likely a result of my fascination with ecological and environmental studies

from a young age, which was satisfied by activities such as collecting tadpoles at Danehy Park. Responses would possibly vary between groups of people from west Cambridge—where there are many more green spaces—as opposed to east Cambridge which has limited green space; my previous knowledge of north and west Cambridge likely made this project biased.

Further research would also consider manmade landscapes in suburban and rural settings, and would compare them to the urban landscapes I have investigated in this thesis project. The broadening of this subject was inspired by my travels to north Texas this school year. I was struck by the practice of building manmade lakes for cattle, as well as the coexistence of oil drilling and wildlife preservation at the Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge. While these landscapes were not in the scope of this research project, they provided a powerful comparison to the landscapes of Cambridge, Massachusetts—they were equally significant as altered landscapes, but in a completely different way. An additional source of inspiration was a documentary titled “Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison”, which detailed how bison are strategically hunted when groups exit the boundaries of protected national forests. This tragedy drew me back to my own observations of the way that landscapes such as forests and public parks are both labeled as “separate” on maps, making me further question the significance—ecological and political—of the enclosure of landscape in the twenty first century.

I intend to explore these issues after graduation, hopefully in a graduate program. In the meantime, I will focus back on Cambridge, Massachusetts by sharing this current work—through writing, web, and exhibition—with the local community. I will contact my city councilors to share the work, and I hope to both exhibit the paintings in other venues and publish a version of this written thesis book.



Figure 46. Oil drilling and birds at Hagerman Wildlife Refuge (January 2012).



Figure 48. Coyote at Hagerman Wildlife Refuge (January 2012).

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