

the master architect series
PETER GISOLFI ASSOCIATES

Finding the Place of Architecture *in the Landscape*



by PETER GISOLFI

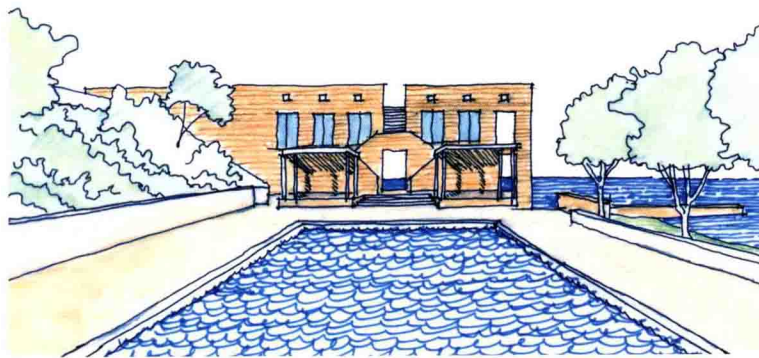
Introduction by Vincent J. Scully, Jr.

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Finding the Place of Architecture
in the Landscape

*To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the column, or the arch to bend,
To swell the terrace, or to sink the grot;
In all, let Nature never be forgot.
But treat the goddess like a modest fair,
Nor overdress, nor leave her wholly bare;
Let not each beauty ev'rywhere be spied,
Where half the skill is decently to hide.
He gains all points, who pleasingly confounds,
Surprises, varies, and conceals the bounds.*

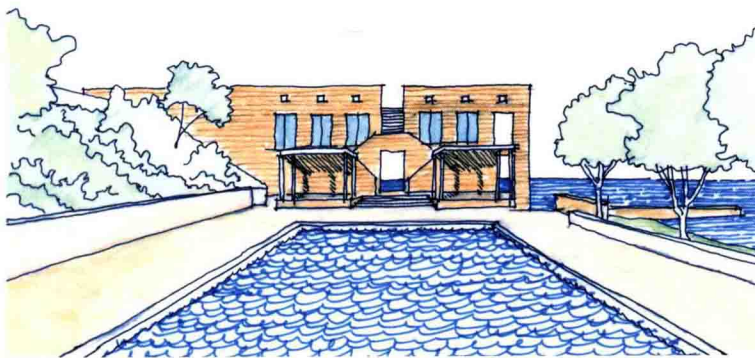
*Consult the genius of the place in all;
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;
Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,
Now breaks, or now directs, th' intending lines;
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.*

—Alexander Pope

Epistles to Several Persons: Epistle IV, To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington

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Introduction

Peter Gisolfi has enjoyed the kind of successful architectural career that was once considered quite normal but has subsequently tended to fall through the cracks of modern history and criticism. It has involved a solid mode of building, rooted in the traditions of a place and devoid of striking new architectural forms and extravagant gestures. Its objectives have always been unpretentious. Not following current styles, its forms are reminiscent of what Henry-Russell Hitchcock once called “The New Tradition” in modern architecture, something recognizably contemporary but, like much of the best English and American work of the early 20th century, by no means separated from vernacular and classical traditions.

In line with those traditions, the most important feature of Mr. Gisolfi's work is that it always deals with buildings and landscape together, as so little of canonical modern architecture has seemed interested in doing. Indeed, the continuing lack of such interest in landscape architecture and garden design is still a scandal in most schools of architecture today. One has to try to remember that Harvard's magnificent program in landscape architecture was once the center of the best city planning the United States has ever known, that of many practitioners like the younger Olmsted and John Nolen, working from the late 19th century onward until the Depression of the 1930s. After that Walter Gropius and his colleagues from the German Bauhaus took over Harvard's Graduate School of Design and effectively wiped the memory of those great days from the consciousness of the school, and from that of all those other schools of architecture throughout the United States that came to be designed in its new image. It is only in recent years that landscape architecture and the kind of humane city building it encourages has begun to recover from that disaster, and Mr. Gisolfi's work is part of that hopeful recovery.

Its home ground comprises Westchester and the Hudson River Valley, none of it very far from Bronxville, Peter Gisolfi's home town, where he tells us that his first impressions of life in the city, and of architecture and town making, were formed. And while his firm has built large projects as far away as Texas, its natural place still clearly remains that beautiful and densely populated landscape, in touch both with older rural traditions and with the urban energies of New York City itself. In that sense, Gisolfi is a regional architect, of an especially rich and active region; one that in the end seems to engender schools of every kind as its proudest public structures. These institutions, whether newly designed, enlarged, renovated, or rebuilt, have formed the heart of Gisolfi's practice. This is especially fortunate, because it is in such programs, always involving a group of buildings—a campus—that Gisolfi can most appropriately do what he does best, which is to relate a number of buildings to each other in a landscape. He shapes an environment out of natural and manmade forms together. His buildings adjust their style to the place, always unemphatically enhancing the landscape and disciplined by it. This book is filled with examples of the shaping of places, the physical development of architecture's holistic realm.

It has proved a very solid way to make an architectural career, to understand one's native environment and to love it as well in its fields and rivers as in its towns. It tends to create intrinsically organized new communities that get along with the old ones and can themselves endure, where trees are as important as buildings and everything can age together, growing old and better suited to each other with the passage of the years.

Vincent J. Scully, Jr., B.A. Ph.D.

*Sterling Professor Emeritus of the History of Art, Yale University, and
Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Miami*

Understanding the Setting

By Peter Gisolfi, AIA, ASLA

When the Acoma people built their pueblo at 7,000 feet above sea level in what is now New Mexico, they constructed it to be perfectly adapted to climate and site, given the constraints of the available materials and technology. This way of building is often described as indigenous architecture. I call it adaptive architecture—architecture that is responsive to its setting in an ecological sense, much as we understand that a beaver’s dam or a beehive are adaptive responses.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the opposite of adaptive architecture has been the internationalization of architecture. Buildings are independent objects, have brand name identities, and can be located anywhere in the world, on almost any site, in any climate. In a sense, architecture of this type resembles a miniskirt or bell-bottom pants. It is fashionable. Even in periods of great intellectual ferment and stylistic debate, many architects have chosen to relate their buildings to local technologies, local climate, and specific sites. This is the better approach. Architecture, of all the arts, should be most tied to its place.

Where, then, does the building belong? The question seems so painfully elementary as to be almost unworthy of being asked. The second equally essential question is how do we build, in what configuration, and with what materials and methods? Often these questions are not seriously asked or seriously answered. Another way of asking these questions is: how do we *find* the place of architecture in the landscape? This book addresses that question. Essays have been written attempting to define the word “landscape.” I understand the word to be inclusive: it includes everything we see—that which is natural and that which is manmade. Understood this way, the landscape is the existing condition before design work begins, and it is the modified condition once the construction is complete.

Much of the debate about architecture focuses on context or setting on one side of the argument, and on object or “original” creation on the other side. Over time, a mediocre contextual building is much less offensive than a mediocre “original.” I believe, however, that there should be no argument: responsiveness to setting and creativity belong together. The best architectural solutions are contextual *and* imaginative.

I always intended to be an architect. As a child, I was fascinated with building. I explored every construction site in my neighborhood. I made models of ships and airplanes. I built with sand, blocks, Erector sets, and Lincoln Logs. I created villages and landscapes for my electric trains. By the age of 10, I was determined to be an architect. I was given Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Natural House* and *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography*. While I always drew, my sketches now were plans for hypothetical houses inspired by Wright’s work and ideas. Some years later, my mother walked me up the hill to Sarah Lawrence College to hear

Frank Lloyd Wright deliver the commencement address. Although I cannot recall what he said, I clearly remember that he seemed old, fragile, and mystical—almost translucent.

My first academic exposure to architecture was as an undergraduate at Yale in the 1960s. I studied drawing and design in Paul Rudolph’s new Art and Architecture Building, and studied art history and architectural history in the old arts school building and in Louis Kahn’s Yale University Art Gallery. I was intensely aware of the urban setting: the nine-square plan of New Haven with the city green in the center, and with the Old Campus of Yale adjacent to it. The most memorable places on the campus were the ecclesiastical quadrangles and the Gothic Revival buildings designed by James Gamble Rogers. He was the main architect of the campus setting, even though his name was never even mentioned when I was an undergraduate. In those days, we only heard of contemporary architects such as Gordon Bunshaft, Paul Rudolph, Philip Johnson, and Louis Kahn; earlier 20th-century architects, who were not modernists, did not exist.

Most of my time at Yale was spent studying music and the humanities. The person who influenced me the most in terms of thinking about architecture was Vincent Scully, the distinguished professor of art history. He had recently published *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods*, which explains the architecture of Greek temples and their relationship to setting. In the simplest terms, his thesis is that the setting—the place—was sacred to the particular deity and that the temple represented the presence of the deity in the landscape. The idea that the landscape was sacred to a particular god or goddess and that the buildings merely celebrated the presence of the god was compelling.

My formal training in architecture began at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1960s and extended into the early 1970s. Philadelphia is a much larger and more elaborate city than New Haven. It too is based on a gridded plan, derived from the Roman Colonial city plan prototype. William Penn’s Philadelphia stretches from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill River, with four squares symmetrically placed around the central square, where Benjamin Franklin’s statue now stands on the tower of city hall. I lived for five years in Center City, two blocks from Rittenhouse Square, which is modeled on the residential squares of London. The city of Philadelphia—the plan of the city, its parks, its buildings, and the entire setting—became as familiar to me as my own hand.

I chose to study architecture at Penn because of the setting and the faculty. I really chose to go to Penn because of Louis Kahn and the “Philadelphia School,” as identified in an article in *Progressive Architecture* in the mid 1960s. Louis Kahn was the guru of the architecture school. Every semester he lectured on his own projects. I visited his design classes, I visited his buildings, I visited his office. As a student I imitated his architectural plans. I became

intrigued with Kahn's idea that inspiring light comes from above, and by his idea that natural light in buildings exists most forcefully in the absence of light. Kahn loved brick. He said that the brick belongs on the ground and can only be supported by other bricks. He always spoke of the *idea* of the building. When the idea finally came to him, it became a narrative or parable that would inform and influence the design. He repeatedly said that you could learn from the building. The building would tell you what it "wanted to be."

Two other architects on the Penn faculty influenced my thinking. Robert Venturi had recently published *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, which I read with rapt attention. I learned that the decoration and exuberance seen in the Baroque and Mannerist architecture of 16th- and 17th-century Rome had application to the then-current debates about Modernism.

The other faculty member was Romaldo Giurgola, the Italian architect. During my first year in architecture school, I was the assistant in his course on modern architectural history and theory; I showed the slides. I thought of him as an unapproachable eminence. His most significant building at that time in Philadelphia was a parking garage near the Penn campus, but his practice and influence were growing. His buildings often included detached screen walls made of masonry, perforated by rectangular openings. I realized gradually that the separation or detachment of the façade from the building is an expression of the Italian or Classical idea that the façade belongs to the outdoor space. It can become the defining wall of an outdoor room such as a forum, a piazza, a quadrangle, or a garden.

When I was at Penn, architectural history had been almost entirely eliminated from the curriculum. I suspect this happened because the faculty had embraced the Bauhaus idea that students would learn from doing and learn from the present; they believed intensely that form followed function. The dean of the architecture school at the University of Pennsylvania had been the assistant dean of the architecture school at Harvard, under Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus. In reaction to this limitation, I arranged an independent reading course with James O'Gorman, a professor of art history, on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance. From these readings, I became more familiar with the buildings of Filippo Brunelleschi and Andrea Palladio. I came to see Louis Kahn as a Renaissance architect, dealing with pure forms and symmetrical plans, intrigued by the complexity of geometry, and by the craft of making masonry buildings even though the decoration was absent. My observation about his work was not encouraged by my design teachers, who thought of Kahn as simply a "modern" architect, separated from the past.

When I finished my degree in architecture, I felt that my studies were incomplete. I wanted a rationale for how to design. Studying landscape architecture appeared to be a way to gain more under-

standing. As an architecture student, I read a book by Victor Olgyay entitled *Design with Climate*, which proposes a completely rational, almost mathematical method for adapting buildings to regional climates and microclimates. The book influenced my thinking, but did not answer the larger questions.

The graduate program in landscape architecture at Penn was founded by Ian McHarg, a Scottish landscape architect, trained after World War II at Harvard. In his book, *Design With Nature*, he advocates a land-planning strategy based on ecological determinism. He states that within the range of natural ecosystems, some are more "suitable" for human habitation or activity than others. It is our obligation to study the landscape, understand it, and find out how to inhabit it in an ecologically intelligent way. This thinking and advocacy were influential in the environmental movement and in the creation of environmental regulations at national, state and local levels throughout the United States. The course of study was more concerned with physical geography and analysis than with landscape architecture in its traditional sense. Instead of getting answers about architecture and the place of architecture in the landscape, these studies raised even more questions—questions that could only be answered over time.

Travel changed my way of seeing the world. Places are more vivid when they are unfamiliar. We tend not to notice our own environment as much as we might notice a new place. My mother grew up in Hoosick Falls, New York, near the border of New York, Vermont, and Massachusetts—a rural landscape of hills, meadows, cornfields, and pastures. My mother's best friend was raised on a dairy farm that had been in her family for more than 200 years. That particular rural landscape is still clear in my mind. It conveys a sense of tranquility that can only be experienced in the "country," where the rhythms are more natural and so much slower than the endless comings and goings of suburban New York life.

In the summer, my family traveled to Cape Cod or Cape Ann along the Massachusetts coast. North of Boston was the rocky shore of picturesque towns, like Rockport and Gloucester, which still felt like they belonged to the 19th century. They were active fishing ports densely developed and dominated by the activities of the fishermen and their boats. The landscape of Cape Cod is still quite similar in appearance to that of 40 years ago. It is the much larger-scaled landscape created by the terminal moraine of the North American glacier. It is a landscape of open views, sand dunes, and vast stretches of ocean and bay that seem to exist for the pleasure of summer vacationers.

My travels abroad were primarily to Italy and only secondarily to France. By the time I finished architecture school, I had spent three summers in Italy—two in Verona and one in Rome, with visits to other places in between. Everything about Italy—the natural

landscape, mountains, seashore and lakes, the agricultural landscape of terraced vineyards, and the urban landscape of countless towns—is vivid in my thoughts and imagination. After studying the works of Palladio and Brunelleschi, I was able to visit almost every one of their buildings. We think of their buildings as complicated. They are truly simple and elegant. The simplicity comes from the clarity of planning and from using very few materials effectively: marble, plaster, stucco, and pietra serena. I have believed ever since that buildings are better when the palette of materials is limited.

One year after I finished my landscape degree at the University of Pennsylvania, I started teaching part-time at the school of architecture at Columbia University. Teaching turned out to be very similar to being a student. Instead of learning from professors, and from reading and designing, I learned from mastering the material sufficiently to explain it to others.

At Columbia, I taught a course in environmental planning, which was derived from my landscape training at Penn. I taught a second course on passive solar design that I called “Adaptive Architecture.” Intermittently, I taught design and parts of other courses as requested. Columbia between 1974 and 1986 was in a period of excitement and change; the school embraced an eclectic and inclusive view of architecture. Teaching there allowed me to begin to learn what I had only studied at Penn.

Simultaneously with teaching at Columbia, I started teaching at City College, which offered professional degrees in architecture and landscape architecture. For ten years, I ran a small architectural office and taught at two schools of architecture. At City College, where I continue to teach today, my focus is broader: I teach architectural design, landscape design, history and theory of landscape architecture, and site planning. This teaching has helped me understand the connections between architecture and landscape architecture.

I have developed my critical thinking by teaching design for more than 25 years. This way of thinking is applied to my students’ work and to my own work. I have learned over and over again that there are many solutions to every design problem, and that the solutions are influenced by which questions we choose to ask.

Teaching courses in the history and theory of landscape architecture has been a whole new education for me. Preparing for these courses has led me to visit dozens of sites in Europe and in the United States, which are important in the history of landscape architecture. The great landscape architects have become familiar to me from reading about them, reading their own words, and visiting their landscapes. Vignola, Andre LeNotre, Capability Brown, and Frederick Law Olmstead exist for me as distinct personalities, with distinct points of view about how we should approach the design of outdoor

space. I see the great trends in landscape architecture as reflections of physical geography (the natural setting), economics, social structure, patronage and ideas. From these are derived the Classical landscape, the Processional landscape, and the Romantic landscape, which are so characteristic of Italy, France, and England.

I always intended that my professional practice would be a synthesis of architecture and landscape architecture. This grand idea has often been constrained by the reality of the actual projects. But certain projects came along early, such as the transformation of the Raebeck house and garden, and the construction of a new resort hotel along the Guadalupe River in Kerrville, Texas.

Over the past 20 years, the practice has expanded and the office has grown from about 10 people to 50 people. The scale of the projects and the variety of the projects have increased. My training, my practice, and the education I have derived from teaching have led me to design solutions where architecture and landscape architecture come together.

My travel in the United States has usually been for work. I have become familiar with most of New England, the Mid-Atlantic States, the Southeast, the Southwest, and the West Coast. Most recently, I have been working in Kansas City and St. Louis. My knowledge of the American landscape is dispersed but focused. In each place, whether Kerrville, Texas; Hastings-on-Hudson, New York; Wellfleet, Massachusetts; or Phoenix, Arizona, I try to understand what the landscape tells us, what the indigenous architectural responses have been, and what belongs in the landscape.

Landscape can be understood in three ways:

- The “natural landscape” is what exists before it is changed by significant human intervention. Many landscapes can still be understood as natural landscapes, even though they have been changed by man. A regional landscape, such as the Hudson River Valley or the coastal plain, when thought of or viewed in the larger context, can still be interpreted as a natural system.
- The “vernacular landscape” is the manmade landscape formed by incremental changes. It could include the rural landscape of New England, the terraced vineyards of Italy, or the flat, gridded agricultural landscape of the Midwest. The vernacular landscape can also include strip shopping centers, the endless disorder and occasional beauty of U.S. Route 1 along the Atlantic seaboard, or the edge-of-city environments that evolve incrementally.
- The “designed landscape” is the landscape consciously designed by human beings—the gardens, parks and parkways, the spaces

at the center of cities and villages, and the subdivisions that spread out from urban centers.

The distinction between designed and vernacular landscapes is blurry and relates to our understanding of the history of design. As architects and landscape architects, we study the designed landscape—the parks and park systems, city plans, village plans, and urban open spaces. But we discount the less glamorous, more evolutionary vernacular landscapes.

Taken as a whole, the landscape is what is there. Finding the place of architecture in the landscape implies that creating the place—creating the right place in the landscape—is the major task of design. Simply by saying this, we assert that the fit between “what is there” and “what is proposed” is a primary concern. Quite often, we encounter a combination of natural factors, such as views, sun exposure, and climate (aspects of the natural landscape), and manmade factors, such as street traffic, zoning, movement patterns, and neighboring buildings (aspects of the vernacular and designed landscape). Understanding this landscape in all its complexity is the first step in deciding how to proceed.

Most architectural monographs are organized according to building types. There are chapters on schools, libraries, places of work, places of assembly, and so on. Such divisions emphasize function above all else. I have chosen to organize the chapters in this book by settings, based on the types of places or the types of landscapes encountered. I had first described this division to myself as groupings by ideas: I think about townscape in a different way from how I think about campus. I realize now that this interpretation applies only partially, and that the more compelling division is by the type of place or setting, in fact, the type of landscape. From these internal debates, I arrived at the chapters: *Townscape*, *Campus*, *Landscapes and Buildings*, *Gardens and Houses*, and *Transformation*.

Townscape is the landscape of cities, towns and villages. It is the shape of the streets and the buildings, and the shape of the underlying landform. Often, the townscape, itself a designed landscape, is part of a regional or wider landscape that can be understood as a natural system. Buildings must relate to urban settings. The design of urban spaces and of cities is a fundamental task of architecture and landscape architecture. Understanding the subtleties of the urban landscape is essential.

Campus is a specific idea and landscape type that we inherited from Europe and developed here in America. It is a tradition of open-space design and building design that has been alive for 700 years. In North America, this tradition has flourished for more than 200 years. Campus addresses the interdependence between buildings and open space that creates a composite designed place, a designed landscape.

Landscapes and Buildings addresses exurban settings, open green landscapes—designed, vernacular, or natural. The issue is how to design buildings or landscapes that relate predominantly to open land or nature.

Gardens and Houses embraces the Italian villa idea and the Romantic landscape tradition. The villa in Italy was a residential setting that combined indoor space and outdoor space to create a place—a series of spaces—for living. Often, Italian villas were set in extraordinary natural landscapes. When the villa idea became prevalent in the United States, it was often connected to design principles of the Romantic landscape tradition. The examples described here are modest, but are based on the idea of the combination of outdoor space and indoor space as the rationale for residential design.

Transformation is the adventure of changing a building or designed place that already exists. Early on, I thought of this exercise as renovation. By embracing the idea of transformation, I have been able to create new buildings and landscapes, where something very definite already existed. This category does not fit neatly into landscape types and is more tied to buildings. Curiously, because of my predisposition to setting, the new design idea that drives the transformation usually includes a strong landscape concept.

I beg some indulgence in the choice of projects included in each chapter. Few of the projects fit neatly into one of the categories. Many projects fit into two or three. All of the projects, however, are based on ideas about architecture and how architecture relates to setting. The most successful architecture relates clearly and unabashedly to setting—to landscape.



TOWNSCAPE

The commuter railroad suburbs in Westchester County, north of New York City, were mostly established before the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Suburban communities grew up around every stop on each rail line. Bronxville and parts of northeast Yonkers form one of those commuter suburbs.

In Bronxville, stately single-family houses sit on manicured lawns. Nevertheless, the area is dense, with a tightly planned village center that developed around the railroad station. My family lived close to that station and village center. For me, the village center, with its familiar churches, library, soda shop, toy store, and movie theater, was the hub. I remember going to the fish market in a neighboring village with my father one day when I was six or seven years old, and asking him when we were going to return to Bronxville, because I thought our village was nicer. My father always teased me about that remark.

For two summers in the 1950s, my parents took the family to Verona, Italy. Verona at that time was a small European city

teeming with bicycles, motor scooters, and tiny cars. I was overcome by the beauty of the city, the way it hugged the edge of a winding river, was surrounded by green hills, and was constantly bathed in bright sunlight. Prior to that, I had thought of a city only in terms of midtown Manhattan, a place that, to my eyes, was intimidating, gray, hard, and unnatural. I learned later that Verona is a truly extraordinary city, founded as a Roman colonial town, modified poetically in the Middle Ages, and changed again during the Renaissance and in subsequent centuries—in fact, a prototypical great European city, only smaller and, therefore, more accessible.

In Verona, we stayed in a 400-year-old apartment with 14-foot-high ceilings, marble floors, and a balcony that overlooked the Piazza Erbe, the open-air vegetable market and the original forum of the Roman town. There were no supermarkets, only separate shops for wine, bread, cheese, meat, fish, and milk. I remember watching the merchants wash the stone pavement every morning before their stalls opened, and listening to the hubbub of shoppers' comings and goings.

