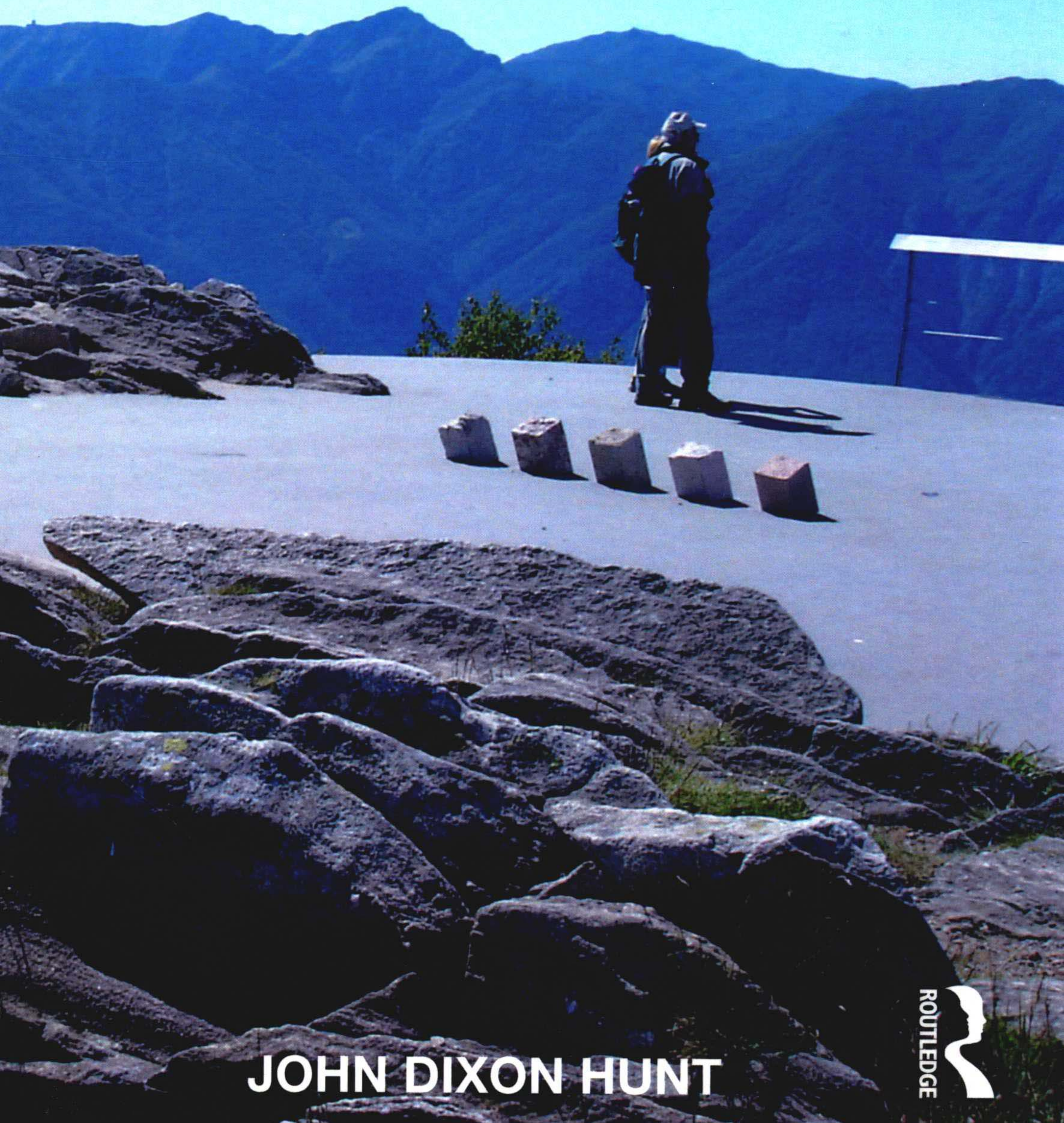


HISTORICAL GROUND

THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



JOHN DIXON HUNT

ROUTLEDGE

Historical Ground investigates how contemporary landscape architecture invokes and displays the history of a site. In the light of modernism's neglect of history, these essays by John Dixon Hunt explore how, in fact, designers do attach importance to how a location manifests its past.

The process involves, on the one hand, registering how geography, topography and climate determine design and, on the other, how history discovered or even created for a site can structure its design and its reception. History can be evident, exploited, invented or feigned – it can be original or a new history which becomes part of how we view a place.

Landscapes discussed in this book come from across Europe and the United States, highlighting the work of designers who have drawn from site history in their design, or have purposefully created their own historical account of the location. The author explores not just the historical past, but how new ground can be given a life and a future.

John Dixon Hunt is Emeritus Professor of the History and Theory of Landscape at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of more than a dozen books and edits the Taylor & Francis journal *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* and is the series editor of the Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture.

LANDSCAPE HISTORY AND THEORY

Cover image: Paolo Bürgi's Geological Observatory, Cardada, Switzerland © John Dixon Hunt

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John Dixon Hunt

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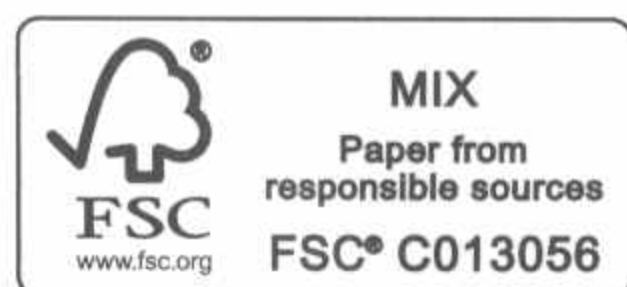
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PREFACE

This is a book about the role of history in the making of, and response to, contemporary landscape architecture. It emerges from some of my previous considerations of meaning in landscape architecture more generally and, recently, from the chance to explore this particular topic with students of landscape architects. Yet it approaches the larger theme of meaning in somewhat different ways: it asks how the history of a particular site may be invoked and used in a new intervention. And it asks that question, firstly, because too much modernist landscape architecture seemed to turn its back on the past and, secondly, because much contemporary landscape architecture is uninterested in locality – especially those great and good landscape architects who fly around the world to create new places where they really know little about the site or even the history of the country where it is to be made. If they do show such an interest, it is likely to be superficial, the work of fancy not imagination (to use Coleridge’s famous distinction that I shall take up in Chapter 4). I have seen too many students in studios fly off for a week of “site visits” to a country where they do not speak the language and have an utterly brief grasp of the local culture and then come home to propose a design: it’s good training in some respects, but it cultivates a habit that sees any place anywhere as a suitable place to dump a design, however skilful.

This small book arose, first, out of an invitation to talk at a symposium at the University of Venice on history and landscape (subsequently published as *Storia* [i.e., history] *e Paessagio* in 2013); this talk was later augmented for a public lecture at Dumbarton Oaks, and then revisited for a presentation on “Topography” at a university in Nanjing, China (the latter was published in *Architectural Studies*, no.2, issue on “Topography & Mental Space” ed. Mark Cousins *et al.*, China Architecture & Building Press, 2012). It also was a topic taken up in a graduate seminar at the University of Pennsylvania in 2010, and has now been finalized during the teaching of a seminar at Penn State University in Spring 2013, where the final draft of these

essays was completed. From all those encounters, I have derived many suggestions and responses from members of those audiences, from colleagues at Penn State and from students there: I have been greatly helped by two research assistants, Nathan Gandrud and Elissa Jane Ferguson.

The book is essentially a collection of essays – since it is not intended as a complete survey of the idea, but rather to suggest ways in which the theme may be taken up by both practitioners and users for further exploration and illustration. It starts with two essays setting out some preliminary issues about the possible role of the historian, and then how geology, topography and weather impact the process of making the historical site. Then come two shorter chapters: first, on three examples of historical representations from the past; second, a discussion of five Parisian contemporary sites; both the early examples and the contemporary ones in Paris provide a useful scale of reference for the larger topic. After that come two long chapters that focus on the two dominant themes of the book – how history is manifested in places that provide designers with the material for that reference, and then how history could be fabricated, manufactured or “feigned” for sites and how such invention works. Finally, it seemed worth looking at how land art plays a role in registering the history of place, but also how little land art actually impacted what can legitimately be termed landscape architecture; that provided a final sequence on the recent flurry of garden festivals and exhibitions and their relevance to historical ground.

I have relied, as my notes and captions acknowledge, on a large resource of publications, both issued by landscape firms themselves or by publishers wishing to record a single designer or a range of examples. A list of the most-cited volumes is appended at the end of the book. I have benefitted hugely from this resource, and my own observations draw both on these volumes and what their texts and images suggest to me as well as on my own visits to these sites. I have also taken suggestions for historical (or sometimes non-historical) projects from students, who can be suspicious of too much historical awareness in contemporary work and, above all, in a landscape historian like me.

I thank most warmly the friends, colleagues and designers who have helped me to obtain illustrations for the text: Paolo Bürgi, Philippe Coignet, Jennifer Current, Georges Descombes, Stuart Echols, Adriaan Geuze, George Hargreaves, Charles Jencks, Karl Kullmann, Bernard Lassus, Peter Latz, David Meyer, João Nunes, Laurie Olin, Neil Porter, Chris Reed, Martha Schwartz, Gideon Fink Shapiro, João Gomes da Silva, Michael Van Valkenburgh, Günther Vogt, Peter Walker, Udo Weilacher, Tom Williamson, and James E. Young.

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1

PRELIMINARY ORIENTATIONS

“What would it mean for a culture to give up on its past?”

(Stephen Greenblatt)¹

“There has never been a time when . . . a study of history provides so little instruction for our present day”

(Tony Blair)²

History is not the past. It is our knowledge of the past, more precisely our attending to some narrative of the past that was told then and is recalled for us now, or that we re-tell in some form today. It is also, these days, hard to think of places without some history that has been told either in the past (and maybe forgotten) or recounted now (so much for Tony Blair!). Some cultures, and some places, have a stronger inclination to live the past, nourishing its stories and the various ways in which they come alive for their inhabitants; others are much more focused on the present and, deliberately or not, decline to listen to those narratives that they consider merely nostalgia.

Landscape architecture, we might suppose, has no site these days that is without some historical ground. Few places are “empty” of history. Although when Robert Frost recited his poem “The Gift Outright” for the inauguration of President Kennedy, he choose to celebrate a myth of the visionary westward movement by new immigrants to North America, buoyed by the vision of a world where they could build, farm and garden in a landscape that was (Frost wrote) “unstoried, artless, unenhanced”. Doubtless those new settlers wished to believe this; but the

1 Stephen Greenblatt, *New York Times Book Review*, 26 August, 2012.

2 Tony Blair addressing the American Congress on the eve of the Iraq war, cited by Nicholas Vincent in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 June 2012.

2 Preliminary orientations

idea that native Americans possessed no stories, were without arts or did not, in some fashion, enhance the lands where they dwelt, was sadly wrong. These days we live in a world that is hugely storied and enhanced – or at least one that has been messed up with the debris of the past we no longer want or need, even if it is “part of history”. As a teenager I dreamed of climbing the as-yet un-scaled Mount Everest, but in the years after it was scaled (led incidentally by somebody called Hunt; no relation, but a happy stand-in), the mountain was under constant siege; its slopes are now eminently storied³ and enhanced, regrettably, by the bodies of those who failed in their ascent as well as by the debris of oxygen bottles that fuelled their climbs.

Yet back in the early 18th century, if you were living in London, a city where rebuilding and expanding the urban land was insistent, you could still read in the poem *London* – which Samuel Johnson published in 1738 – a hope for virgin land somewhere else in the world:

Has heaven reserv'd, in pity to the poor,
No pathless waste, or undiscover'd shore;
No secret island in the boundless main?
No peaceful desart yet unclaim'd by Spain?

(lines 170–3)

Today there are very few, if any, pathless wastes or undiscovered shores. Many landscape architects seem – and I emphasize “seem” – to delight in tackling what they consider pathless wastes, some toxic or industrial wasteland, some derelict cityscape, to fashion it into some exciting and new social space, as if it had no history.

There is, of course, no obligation for landscape architects to celebrate historical ground. Indeed, as artists, they cherish the chance to make something new – a result of both their own artistic visions and their indebtedness to a modernism that declines to be interested in the past. Yet many designers whom I know spend a great deal of time understanding a site and its culture, including its historical events, before they embark on their own projects; sometimes their explorations of the original past can find expression in a new place. But it is often not their priority – for many reasons: their own lack of interest in the past as opposed something they can make that is new; their clients' concern to make a modern splash; a community committed, understandably, to seeing that its location responds to current needs. I suspect that there is a stronger impulse in Europe to respond to historical ground than in the United States.

But there is also the lack of both opportunity and a suitable vocabulary to find some means of making history visible. Landscape architects are not historians, and

3 The library is full now of these accounts: see especially Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003) and Wade Davis, *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the conquest of Everest* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

even if they do some research on a site's history prior to redesigning it, they have probably little skill in articulating some aspect of the past. It is rare that they'd ask a *bone fide* historian to work for them, but even then they themselves have the obligation to find formal, palpable ways of making that history visible, which the historian is less capable of doing than (presumably) a landscape architect. Some practitioners do this, as we shall see, but often the history seeps, so to speak, from the site regardless of any formal decision by the designer. One seepage is that the past vocabulary of garden- and park-making makes itself felt unconsciously in the very forms and devices that are still used: we still rely on paths, viewpoints, grading of the earth and mounds, tunnelling, decoration with sculpture, and insertion of buildings; we shall see much of that in the following pages. However, some designers, as I shall also suggest, can "invent" a history for the place, a history that may have little or no reason for being there, but one that can take hold and infect visitors' imagination with a sense of something plausibly historical. I want to call these *fabricated histories*, as opposed to fractured ones (the real hints and possibilities that do emerge).

One of the issues for a landscape architect is that even if he or she *were* an accomplished historian, they are not physically present on the site that they design. They can write – retrospectively by subsequently recording their original intentions – that their work reflects, say, ancient Roman brickwork: on the architectural arches at the Robert F. Wagner Jr. Park in Battery Park, New York, Laurie Olin explained that "This was achieved through the use and material pointedly reminiscent of Flavian brickwork as seen in the ruins at Ostia Antica ... and through the suggestion of an anthropomorphic transformation of the structures into a buried and deracinated head of a colossus gazing fixedly out into the harbour" towards the Statue of Liberty.⁴ This is intriguing, yet it has little traction on the site itself; the historical details may work for the original designer, but – in the absence of a personal commentary and his or her ability to "point" out those ideas on the spot – they are meaningless; visitors have to make sense of what they see by themselves.

By contrast, a historian, writing, has control of his narrative; he or she can structure the argument, the tonal nuances, even the facts, by which the story can be told and insinuated. A film maker and a novelist have similar ways of directing our understanding of the tales they tell; they edit and nudge our reading of the narrative. Even a painter, though usually not a visible presence in the painting (there are interesting exceptions⁵), can so structure the scene, its characters and their action that we grasp how that particular history goes, or we know enough of the event (from its title, for example) to see how the artist has slanted or loaded the tale. For no history is wholly objective nor innocent, and the teller of the tale (the historian) plays a fundamental role in directing the narrative.

4 Laurie Olin, "What I do when I can do it: Representation in recent work", *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 19 (1999), p.143.

5 The painting by Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, shows the painter confronting the unseen royal couple who are notionally behind the viewer.

4 Preliminary orientations

But the landscape architect has none of those possible roles. He or she can neither report objectively nor direct the telling of the tale. There are some exceptions. When Lawrence Halprin designed the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC, he followed the leads of previous monuments in that capital and used words, by which at least part of the history was readily made available (Figure 1.1). In addition, by laying out FDR's career in four rooms, to signal his four terms as president, Halprin could tell a story about his life, since the rooms were a sequence and the quoted words were, as always with words, sequential. (It is however, a touch awkward if visitors get into the fourth room first; but they can backtrack and start in the first). Halprin himself is not there, though presumably a park ranger can perform that story for him and his design; but Halprin's choice of quotations and his layout did articulate a history, even for those with only a slight recall of FDR's presidency. So the designer can act as narrator, and we can adjudicate that narrative for how it consorts with the history that we ourselves bring to such a memorial.

That narratives can be history is self-evident ("Once upon a time..."); but it is not always evident that the historical event is thereby made clear. In the case of Halprin's FDR Memorial, he narrates, dramatizes and images the presidential career, and from that we derive a sense of (or we tell ourselves about) FDR's career, its political history and its sequences in response to what we see and read. We shall



FIGURE 1.1 Lawrence Halprin, The FDR Memorial, Washington, DC, using quotations from FDR as part of the narrative.

frequently in the pages that follow encounter this slippage, a slipping from image into implied narrative and thence into a historical moment that is reified in that place. Man has always been *homo narrator*.⁶ It must also be noted that narratives are themselves an inventive operation rather than a factual one. Where some narrative is not articulated – when for example we see some image of a far-away place,⁷ or observe the autumn foliage – we may still derive a historical sense by the simple fact that we narrate it to each other or to ourselves. Part of a historical narrative may take the form of a recitation or rehearsal of associations that pertain to that event; those in their turn, though, call out for some reciprocal response by visitors. In this, both landscape narratives and associations are “performed”, and performances require an audience.

But often designers will have neither words that help to tell a story nor a sequence by which a narrative might emerge. Many designers deplore the use of words or the use of inscriptions in their designs; nor do many gardens and landscapes have a specific route by which we can unravel a tale – we tend to do it retrospectively, putting the bits and pieces that we find while exploring together into a narrative constructed retrospectively.⁸ And we may also find that gardens can invent a narrative for us, or we do it for them in responding to what we find there. In the film, *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, a man and a woman on a garden terrace discuss a statue nearby and what the site means. The man explains to the woman how the statue of the male figure is holding the woman back or somehow frustrating her. It is the character's personal fiction, of course, but it supposedly informs his understanding of the landscape and how the two of them see it and each other. But a little later in the film a rather boring figure starts to explain the “historical” meaning of the sculptural pair by saying that the male figure was actually that of Charles III, and the ‘historian’ then proceeds to explain its “true” history. Interestingly, though, as he begins to tell that story, the film, typically, trails off and leaves us without him finishing that “history”!⁹

So it may be that the story envisaged by the designer, or something approximating to that original design, may be a wholly different tale from the one invented by a visitor according to how she or he responds to it. So, it is often possible that the “reception” of sites and landscapes has simply nothing to do with an “original” design; visitors now respond to whatever they find to say about it. This is highly problematical and indeed complex, and we have not really begun to grasp how to

6 Jay Gould, “So Near and So Far”, *New York Review of Books* (20th October, 1994), p.26.

7 I am thinking here of the Jardin Atlantique (see Chapter Four) where an imagined place is “narrated” by a specific garden design and this supplies us with a narrative about a place that offers some history in our lives or in contemporary culture (the invention of the seaside). For the narrative of autumn leaves, see Chapter Two.

8 I have approached this topic in “Stourhead revisited and the pursuit of meaning in gardens”, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 26/4 (2006).

9 In fact, for this incident Alain Resnais invented the statue, partly based on a figure in a Poussin painting: see Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Jean-Louis Leutrat, *Alain Resnais: Liaisons secrètes, accords vagabonds* (Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006), pp.223–4.