Jesse Newman

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Fernandez

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How Dan Kiley Changed the Landscape

Dan Kiley is best described as a pillar and founding father of modernist Landscape Architecture. His sophisticated designs come from European roots and inspirations and led to fantastic geometric landscapes and gardens. Some of Kiley’s seminal work is the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, the Miller Garden, and Pattern Garden. Dan Kiley lived a very full life first as an apprentice in the streets of Boston, then into the hall of education at the prestigious Harvard University, then to the war in the forties and after that as a practicing Architect and Landscape Architect across the U.S. and in parts of France.

Dan Kiley jumped into the field of Landscape Architecture from at a very early age. Kiley was born in Boston Massachusetts in 1912, where he attended public school and graduated in 1930 (Walker, 2005). After high school Kiley started an apprenticeship with a man named Warren Manning who was a colleague of Olmsted. It was in Warrens Cambridge office that Kiley began to find a passion design. Through his apprenticeship he was able to learn the rudiments behind the Landscape Architecture profession. According to Manning, Kiley was “quick witted and out going” and for that reason was given great responsibility. Among these was the job of picking plant materials for certain projects; this duty was a factor in Kiley’s later interest plants and plant location in designs (Walker, 2005).

Since an apprenticeship cannot yield all the answers a curious designer has, education is an important step in the process to become a master. After his years as an apprentice to Manning, Kiley moved to the classrooms of Harvard Universities design school. At Harvard Kiley’s classmates included Garret Eckbo and James Rose. They were all influenced by this idea of modernism that was coming across from Europe and these ideas shaped the designer’s styles and future works (Walker, 2005). Although Kiley learned many things from the Harvard program, he did not complete his education but instead married and started his own office in New Hampshire practicing architecture for a short time before becoming involved in the war in the early 40’s (Walker, 2005).

Kiley joined the war effort in 1943, which ended up being an important turning point in his career as a Landscape Architect. His background in architecture and design gave him the opportunity to create the layout for the Nuremberg Trials courtroom (Walker, 2005). His travels through Europe took Kiley to the beautiful gardens of Versailles, and the artwork of Andre Le Notre. Kiley brought these influence back to the states where he started to craft “modernists” designs for the first time on the East Coast and in the Mid West (Walker, 2005).

After his returned from the war Dan Kiley went back to his work in his New Hampshire office which would later move to Burlington VT and then to Charlotte VT. Kiley’s professional contacts such as Eero Saarinen, I.M. Pei, Louis Kahn, and Gordon Bunshaft, led to the modernist designs he is famous for (Walker, 2005). This modernism is seen in his work with the Jefferson Expansion Memorial, Miller Garden, and the Pattern Garden.

The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial is a built landscape in St. Louis Missouri, and holds the iconic arch that could be considered a gate to the west. Kiley became involved in this project when his mentor Mr. Saarinen suggested he enter a design competition for the park that was to connect the arch and the river (Martin). Kiley worked on the design of the park from 1948-1964 and it amassed to a large project with 900 tulip poplar trees. Unfortunately the execution of the park landscape did not closely follow Kiley’s original designs and drawings however he was giving credit for the beautiful green park landscape that represents the expansion west, and the journey of Louis and Clark. (Walker, 2005)

Another quintessential design by Dan Kiley is his work on the Miller Garden. The location of this site is in Columbus Indiana, and was designed by The Office of Dan Kiley. The design was built on a 13-acre plot and is considered to be Dan Kiley’s masterpiece of residential work (Walker, 2005). There are three distinct sections to the property, the east most plot holds a formal holding the house garden, the center holds an open meadow, and the western most portion contains a red maple lined lawn (Walker, 2005). An important aspect of the design is that the interior of the home and the exterior garden designs flow seamlessly from indoor to outdoor. The residence has been donated to the Indianapolis Art Museum as of 2008 after the death of the residence owner.

Kiley’s last project before his death in 2004 was an intricate residential design that was based off the poem “Patterns” by Amy Lowell (Walker, 2005). Pierre du Pont IV and his wife Elise, commissioned the gardens on their 14-acre property in Rockland Delaware. The entire site is filled with a richness of materials such as native beech, oak, and poplars (Walker, 2005). The grounds hold stone materials like brick, gravel, and granite (Walker, 2005). The design is still being fined tuned to this day, however Kiley’s mastery and craftsmanship left a foundation of geometric landscapes to build off of and carefully maintain as part of his legacy of designs.

The modernism Kiley has brought to the field of Landscape Architecture is a style that has been reciprocated many of the lectures we have seen in LSA 220 this fall. There is something appealing about the geometric and symmetric shapes that Kiley articulated in his work. I love the aesthetic of a clean garden with simple plantings and sharp distinct edges, which is a stylistic approach seen in most of Kiley’s residential installations. As Kiley transitioned the ideas of Landscape Design to a modernist style he set precedent for the architects who would follow in his footsteps. His work changed the definition of what Landscape Architecture is today.

Work Cited

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