A Study of the Studio Design Process and Critique of Built Work - The Yiddish Book Center
Amherst, Massachusetts

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Introduction

A graduate landscape architecture studio was held in the spring of 1999 that explored design concepts for the National Yiddish Book Center’s Yiddish Writers Garden. The studio was comprised of second year graduate students, many of whom were unfamiliar with the Yiddish culture. This studio took on the role of introducing the students to a culture and in turn designing a garden that is responsive to the unique cultural history, the programmatic needs of the Book Center and to the site itself. This paper will give an overview of the studio through a description of the center and the site, explanation of design objectives, review of course content and assignments and finally the presentation of final design recommendations. Following the studio overview will be description of the design that was implemented and a critique of this work.

National Yiddish Book Center

The National Yiddish Book Center (NYBC) was founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky, then a graduate student of Yiddish Literature. Lansky discovered in the course of his studies that thousands of Yiddish books were being lost in America. Many children of Yiddish speaking parents or grandparents couldn’t read the language and were discarding the books. In order to preserve the legacy of Jewish life in Eastern Europe Lansky organized a group of volunteers, that were part of a nationwide network, to collect and save the remaining books. The NYBC has had striking success, collecting over 1.5 million volumes and counting. They serve not only as a repository for the books, but as a distribution center for universities, libraries and individuals. In addition they are involved in an effort to digitize the contents of its collection and creating an on-line catalogue of their holdings.

Another important mission of the NYBC is to increase awareness of the Yiddish culture, both to new generations and to those that may have lost their association to the culture over time. Initiatives have included a National Public Radio series celebrating Yiddish writers, “Jewish Short Stories from Eastern Europe and Beyond.” Other projects include internships, fellowships and conferences. A goal of the Center is to be a mecca for those interested in learning more about the Yiddish culture and to bring that culture alive, and sustain its life for generations to come. Part of this mission is focused on the NYBC itself, where scholars, students and enthusiasts can gather to research and explore the culture.

The Center is located at the edge of the Hampshire College campus in Amherst, Massachusetts. It is sited in an old apple orchard, with the structure set above the remaining orchard, beside a working crop field. When the studio began only the first stage of site improvements had been made. The Center’s first objective was to build the structure that now houses not only thousands of books, but also a theater, library, and exhibit halls. The building itself was designed to reflect the traditional form of the shtedtl, an Eastern European village center.

Natural materials such as wood and...
stone were used to create a modern form that serves the programmatic needs of the Center, while respecting the traditional cultural forms.

The program for the site was to allow the building to remain in the natural setting of the apple orchard, while providing for an interaction between the indoor and outdoor spaces. One element that had already been installed to form one of the “outdoor rooms” was an amphitheater. The amphitheater was down the slope from the interior theater space and has a backdrop of a pine grove.

**Programmatic Needs**

The challenge for the studio to meet was to create a Yiddish Writers Garden (YWG), a garden that honored approximately 70 Yiddish writers. The budget was given as $100,000, though some flexibility was suggested in this figure. The main objectives for the YWG was for the design to be complementary and consistent with that of the Center and the surrounding rural landscape. Beyond creating a design that did not compete with the architecture of the Center, there were several desires for the site, to incorporate a fountain into the design.

**Course Content and Assignments**

An important objective of this studio was to research and understand a culture that was new to a majority of the students. In order to facilitate this process two assignments were given to the class, to create a source board to design concepts, write a report about an aspect of the Yiddish culture and as a group create a site analysis. In addition the class was instructed to immerse themselves in the culture by reading literature, watching movies and spending time at the NYBC’s resource center, located on the site.

Source boards were completed by all students and varied. Many included examples of words or literature found in the landscape, whether in memorials, children’s gardens or parks. Another common theme was the integration of natural features such as orchards, forest edges and natural topography. Other design elements explored included fountains, as one was called for in the program plan. Many referenced different aspects of the culture that are found in contemporary society.

The reports

![Two of the students source boards illustrating design concepts, examples, and inspirations.](image_url)
on Yiddish culture allowed each member of the class to learn about the many aspects of the culture that were explored. Topics explored included investigations into specific writers that were candidates for inclusion on the Writers Garden, music, plays and ethnographic studies. Together the group learned about a people and their way of life, as well as the influences that have lead to a decline in the active membership of the culture.

The site evaluation yielded information crucial to the design project. Collaborative efforts lead to an analysis which pointed out the key opportunities and constraints of the site. One major constraint was the change in elevation, especially close to the structure. Some of this elevation change was engineered as a drainage swale, bringing surface water around the south side of the building releasing into the apple orchard. On the north side of the building drainage is managed through a pipe which releases water into a nearby stream, significant erosion is associated with this area. Other constraints included road noise from Route 116, just east of the site. In this aspect, the pine grove to the east serves well as a visual and physical barrier to the roadway sound. One of the more significant existing site features was a large oak just south of the entrance to the Center. The oak provides shade in the summer, color in the fall and defines the southern property edge, all while framing the Holyoke Range. Another interesting site feature is a pond below the pine grove, along the wooded edge of the roadway.

**Student Design Concepts**

**Modernist Visions**

Several students took a modernist approach to designing the site. One designed a long black bottomed reflecting pool that served as the centerpiece of the concept. This pool provided visitors and opportunity to contemplate their connection to the Center, the purpose of the Center and the natural setting that surrounds the site, with Bare Mountain in the distance. Elements of the design included a walkway that leads from the entrance of the Center around the side to an area that presents the writers and looks over the pool. Visitors could step down to the pool or continue on a ramped pathway to the outdoor amphitheater. Visitors could wander through the orchard and down to the picnic area, but there was no formal path in these areas.

Another modernist approach explored a different approach to the site. One student looked at the site as a series of areas that would lead a visitor around the Center experiencing different aspects of Yiddish culture in each space. Visitors could encircle the Center by a number of different routes, either staying at the edge of the building or venturing out into the orchard and out to the picnic area. One main designed spaces was located at the transition into the rear of the site. Following the amphitheater was the space dedicated to storytelling. This space was particularly monumental, with concentric rings of seating and pillars celebrating and announcing the writers.
Two design concepts introduced significant new structures to the site. One of these designs incorporated heavily replanting the orchard and creating a large formal garden entry building as well as a shelter for the existing amphitheater, using this as a destination and centerpiece behind the Center. The other design that incorporates anew building is similar to several of the more formal design concepts in that it has a path that follows the edge of the Center. As the path leads to the back of the building there is a formal pathway with stones set in the ground memorializing Yiddish writers. This pathway then leads to a open pavilion at east edge of the orchard, available for picnics or as a resting space.

**Organic Concepts with Formal Elements**

While some students were following more modernist concepts others were moved by the natural setting and the association of the Yiddish culture with the land. One of these concepts provides the visitor with choice. After an entry space that leads the visitor around the south side of the site this design concept provides two paths. One can either go out into the orchard, to the picnic grove and back around the south side of the site, or follow a more formal path by the edge of the building with stone walls defining boundaries and the route. Within the more formal area Yiddish writers are announced and celebrated. In addition the design integrates a patio intended for employee breaks, into the design, allowing this area to both act as a separate and individual space and augment the open space available for the visitor.
Formal Concepts

Many students reacted to the grid created by the pattern of the apples trees in the orchard. This resulted in a number of more formalized designs. Many of these designs also allowed for more informal movements, but did not plan specific routes or paths for visitors.

One of the more formalized designs explored some of the details of memorializing writers by creating a model of a prototype plaque with Yiddish characters carved into it. The intent of these plaques was that they could be hung from the apple trees in the orchard, allowing for a more interactive and exploratory experience for the visitor. The design related to this concept provides rectilinear pattern of spaces that the visitor could explore through a path that leads to the amphitheater. This concept introduces both the formal and informal within the design.

One of the most formal plans respected the orchards grid design and took that to a new level, creating a sunken room with stone retaining walls. This room utilized the natural change in topography, and provided a private contemplation zone within the orchard.

Carving formal spaces out of the orchard was repeated in another design which was portrayed in a model with clay to illustrate how different elements were carved into the earth. This design integrated elements that existed on the site, like the orchard, and brought in local stone work to define edges and integrate with the natural materials used in the building. The formal pathway leads the visitor through a series of rooms and allows them to explore the rest of the site as they wish, again incorporating the formal and informal.
Another more formalized approach provided a design concept with a simple path following the building foundation and leading out into the orchard to a rectilinear space in which the Yiddish writers were remembered. The designed pattern fit within the existing grid of the orchard and newly created spaces were defined by a border of vegetation.

**Combined Concept**

In particular one design concept integrated both formal and informal aspects. This design allowed much of the orchard to remain in its existent state, creating an informal path leading though it after the formal pathway. The journey begins by the entrance to the Center with a curvilinear route along the edge of the structure. Once the visitor is behind the Center a more formal experience begins. The formal rectilinear spaces are organized against the edge of the building. The first space is the smallest and most simple with an open sitting area surrounded by vegetation. The second space is a fountain set behind the existing indoor theater room. It is intended to link the interior and exterior. One would proceed past the fountain into a large terraced and arbored garden. At this point the visitor could follow the informal path through the orchard or return the way they came.
 Installed Design

The design that was installed incorporated modest elements of those presented. It takes its cue from the both the more informal elements and some of the more formal elements and is a work in progress. As all of the design did the installed design creates a route to the rear of the site along the south edge by the old oak tree. A curved path passes by the oak and has a informal scattering of chairs and resting places for visitors. As one comes into the orchard behind the Center one must cross over a bridge and a small brook-like water feature. After crossing the bridge the path is more formal and incorporates wooden platforms with plaques commemorating Yiddish writers. This path then leads to the amphitheater and allows visitors to wander off into the orchard and down to the pine grove and picnic area.

Conclusion

This studio provided students with an opportunity to explored design concepts as they related to a whole cultural experience. The designs created during the studio process varied greatly from those with deep concern for the natural setting and existing features, to those that looked at creating a whole new experience on the site. Many had formal elements combined with more informal elements, as the installed design did. Often materials used in the designs were stone walls and other elements not of Eastern Europe, but of the working immigrants that settled in Western Massachusetts. Adaptations and interpretations of memorial elements such as one students’ scale model of a wooden column that would hold plaques and illumination elements. A detail of this feature can be seen below. Other design elements such as the detailing or naming of spaces, like the Peacock Fountain (the peacock is an important Yiddish cultural icon); illustrate the benefits of learning about the culture associated with project site. Cultural immersion studios and design processes are beneficial both to the student, instructor and the client.