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# “Bath: Narration in the Landscape ... Notes From My Journal”

Rick Forsyth

Narration in architecture, and from my point of view, the landscape is an appropriate theme for this issue of *OZ*. Whether viewed as an intentional direction in design or as a way of interpreting or reading meaning from what has been done in the past, narrative plays a critical role in our experience of architecture and the environment.

During the spring of 1987, I took a sabbatical leave from my position as professor of landscape architecture and associate dean of the College of Architecture and Design at Kansas State University. As a landscape architect, and a confessed romantic, I was interested in experiencing the outstanding visual and narrative qualities of the English landscape. The years of studying the English landscape, from my days as a student in landscape history courses, through readings and countless numbers of slides, left an enduring imprint on my mind. The writings of two notable landscape authors and former teachers of mine at Harvard, J.B. Jackson and Kevin Lynch, significantly influenced my decision to study in England. From January to early June, my family and I resided in Bath, England, a city nestled in the Southern reaches of the Cotswold Hills, about one hour due west of London.

Bath, one of the great cities in the world and one long studied by planners, architects, landscape architects, landscape architects, archaeologists, and historians, is a place where the college of human ac-

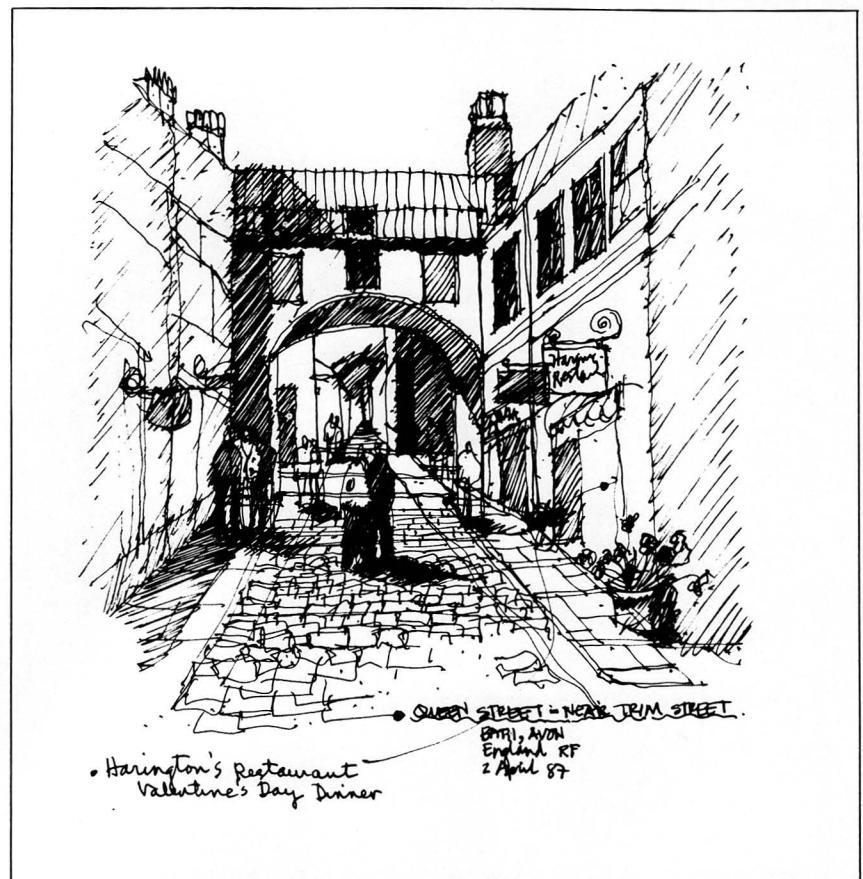
tivity and natural forces have visibly shaped the quality of the city throughout centuries of time. For me and countless others who have visited or lived there, Bath's landscape and architecture expresses important meaning.

“I would be more than content if I could myself learn to distinguish between these two very different but complementary elements in our landscape: one established and maintained by law and political institutions, dedicated to permanence and planned evolution; the other, the vernacular landscape, identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to share some of my experiences in Bath, and in particular, a few of the places that had special meaning to me.

From the start I purposefully avoided developing a formal, structured study of Bath. What mattered to me most was the experience, the spontaneous, personal interaction with the place.

“Wandering (through the landscape) is one of the most sensible things in the world to do ... bending, stopping, pausing, enjoying, not going anywhere in particular always knowing that there is something wonderful just ahead.

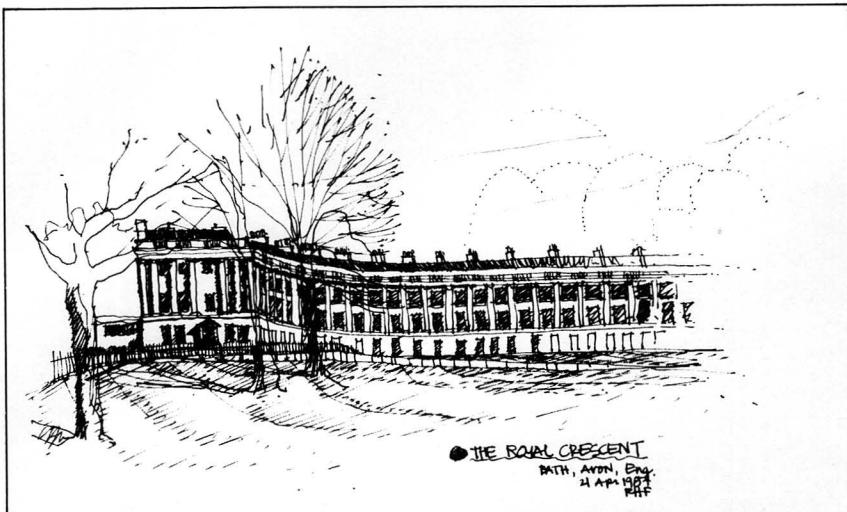


Queen Street

City street or country lane ... there is always something to see ... And herein lies sanity.”<sup>2</sup>

Daily I would spend three to four hours, and often longer, walking Bath's streets, alleys and country lanes; drawing, photographing and stopping in the pubs to record my impressions in my sketchbook or journal. This routine became my

dominant “workday.” During inclement weather (one never knew what to expect), I spend time in the Bath Reference Library reading the incredible collection of books on the city as well as examining the vast archival holdings of architectural drawings, prints and photographs, including original plans by John Wood the Elder, John Wood the Younger, John Evelyn and Robert Adam.



The Royal Crescent



St. James Square

For more than 2000 years human activity has existed on the site. Following the Bronze and Iron Age settlements, the Romans discovered natural springs flowing forth with hot, soothing water. They built structures over the hot springs in the form of baths and temples. For twelve centuries after the departure of the Romans, Bath was a quiet ordinary medieval town distinguished from a thousand others only by the presence of the springs. It was the sudden flare of fashion and fortuitous genius in the eighteenth century, that made Bath the city "*sui generis*." At this time Bath became a fashionable resort.

Through the efforts of Richard 'Beau' Nash, a social gad-fly and raconteur who directed the whimsical, opulent lifestyles of the rich and famous, and the influential local entrepreneur, Ralph Allen, the groundwork was laid for the intense building activity that transformed Bath into a major tourist attraction. Georgian Bath became a city of right angles and gentle curves, with elegant limestone structures of uniform heights, built into its hillsides with classical assurance. Today the virtual quality of Bath is still the dominant features of the setting. A well-managed process has preserved a

balance between the characteristic beauty of the surrounding landscape and the architectural gems of the Georgian and medieval city.

Bath has the gift of heightening all activities, giving an unexpected beauty to everyday affairs. The perfectly calculated and planned proportions of the buildings, the green intervening forms of its squares, crescents, parks, and gardens, together with the magnificent vistas to the hills beyond, become the ingredients for the recipe of surprise and delight. Narrow steps and alleys lead the eye to greater spectacles; ornate iron railings, brackets, details of stone provide greater visual enhancement to the classical, sometimes monotonous frontages behind; artisan cottages and other quaint structures correct the scale of the large uninterrupted forms that dominate the city. Symmetries are broken and incongruities occur which result in far more pleasing harmony than overly regulated and totally planned developments found in many other cities.

At this point, it seems desirable to describe some of my special "walks." From our flat at Number Six Cavendish Place located just below Sion Hill, and approximately two blocks from the

Royal Crescent, I would, almost daily, make the five minute trek to the Jolly Baker for fresh, still warm croissants. The small bakery was set among other important shops such as the butcher, green-grocer, post office, and of course, the pub; all which existed to serve the neighborhood around St. James Square. Built during the 18th century, this square was defined on all sides by continuous walls of four story limestone Georgian row houses. A wonderful central green contained two of the largest trees I have ever seen; a London plane tree and a purple beech, both more than 100 years old. They provided a sense of unity to the space, reaching out across the streets and walks creating a ceiling over the space and reducing the square to a more intimate scale. Like many residential squares in Bath, it was surrounded by a simple, black iron fence. The soft passive, informally landscaped space was primarily meant to be viewed from the walk rather than used for play.

Beyond St. James Square toward the city centre I would pass through the Classical grand sequence of spaces designed by John Wood the Elder and his son John Wood the Younger during the period 1827-1854. This development was formed by Queen Square, Gay Street, the Circus, Brock Street, the



The Royal Circus and Brock Street

Royal Crescent and the Royal Victoria Park. Within the well-visited and traveled sequence was a walk or path known as the Gravel Walk. It provided a less formal route for local residents between the Royal Crescent and Queen Square. The Gravel Walk followed immediately behind the private flats of the elegant row houses along Brock Street, the Circus and Gay Street. On the other side of the Gravel Walk was the spacious, well-groomed landscape of the Royal Victoria Park and its Lower Crescent Gardens, a product of the Victorian Period in Bath.

As I followed the gently curving meander of the wide path from the Royal Crescent toward Queen Square, I came across more magnificent trees. One in particular caught my eye. It was an ancient Strawberry tree, one of those smaller flowering trees that, with time, grew in a rambling horizontal manner, producing an interesting asymmetrical form. Over time the tree had grown in such a manner that several large trunks had to be supported with steel strapping, iron bars, heavy-gauge wire and vertical wood posts. Large cavities in



The Gravel Walk

the trunk where the wood had rotted away were painted black with pruning paint to prevent further disease. It was very apparent that great care and maintenance had been taken by the city to save and extend the life of this special tree.



The Strawberry Tree

Perhaps my favorite of all spaces in Bath was the small, intimate courtyard adjacent to the Abbey Church. Located in the heart of the city centre on the exact place where the alter of the Roman Temple to Sul Minerva was sited, the Abbey Churchyard space was defined by the facade of the Pump Room, a row of 18th Century shops and the imposing west front of the Abbey with its huge carved door and its angels climbing up Jacob's ladders to heaven. The floor of the space was paved entirely of flat limestone, smoothed with time, and provided a suitable base for the many activities which took place there. It was quite a noble arrangement, but if the frame of one's view is monumental, the scene is intimate, like a miniature toy piazza.

But for me the true quality of Bath lies beyond the public-tourist Bath. Prodigy



The Abbey and Churchyard



The Kennet and Avon Canal

Bath, where the older, more modest functions of the town survive, one can experience the lesser known areas. Here is "another city" altogether, hardly less beautiful in its less showy way, but definitely closer to the inner spirit of the place. Crossing the River Avon behind the Bath Spa Rail Station, one enters the quaint, 15th century parish town of Widcombe. This edge of the city is an area of old manor farms and country villas which face the city centre from the southern hills. Walkways along Bath's busy streets soon give way to narrow lanes where the houses are built right up to the edge of the street. High up Widcombe Hill along Church Street I discovered the original 15th century parish church, St. Thomas A'Becket. The soot-covered gray stone structure occupied a point of land which split the road in two directions. I headed up behind the church on the lane leading to the left which was appropriately called Church Lane. It meandered on for several hundred yards, coming to a halt at an iron gate beside some gray stone cottages with sienna slate roofs. To my mind this was the most English place in Bath, with true country cottages with "cottage gardens," moss-covered steps and great stone walls linking house and out buildings.

Further along the lane I came to a magnificent vista. A continuous stone wall about chest height defined the edge of the path and provided a place to lean against while viewing the picturesque scene. The view was of a broad open



Somerset Place

valley with a stream falling in a winding fashion down the center of the meadow. Beneath a small Palladian bridge it emptied into a small pond. The land formed the central feature of Ralph Allen's spacious country estate, Prior Park, built during the mid-18th century. Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, the famed landscape architect of the picturesque English landscape movement, was thought to have had a hand in the design of Prior Park.

The accounts are few, but are a sampling of the countless places experienced during my stay in Bath. They represent highly personal interactions with the landscape. The powerful narrative meanings evoked from the experiences will linger forever in my memory and will significantly affect the continued growth of my attitude toward the landscape. J.B. Jackson stated that "the value of history is that it teaches about the future." Narration in the landscape tells us or expresses to us the "meaning of our common Humanity."<sup>3</sup>

#### ENDNOTES:

1. J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (New Haven and London, 1984), p. xii.
2. Ann H. Zwinger, Quotation Section in *Time*, June 18, 1984, p. 75.
3. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 153.

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1. Cunliffe, Barry, *The City of Bath*, Gloucester, Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1986.
2. Jackson, J.B., *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.
3. Lynch, Kevin, *What Time is This Place*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972.
4. Pound, Christopher, *Genius of Bath: The City and its Landscape*, Bath, Millstream Publishing Ltd., 1986.
5. Zwinger, Ann H., Quotation Section in *Time*, June 18, 1984.

#### PHOTO CREDITS:

1. Cunliffe, *The City of Bath*, Frontpiece.
2. Victoria Art Gallery, Bath.