

Landscape Design and Landscape History at the Arnold Arboretum: The Landscape Institute

The Landscape Institute had its beginning in 1966 when landscape architect Diane Kostial McGuire, then a Radcliffe College Bunting Fellow, was invited to teach a course in the Radcliffe Seminars. Her seminar, “An Intellectual History of Garden Art,” was so well received that by 1968 a landscape design certificate program had been formed around it. The program sought “to meet the needs of a wide range of students: those who wish to develop an awareness of the landscape or to investigate landscape design as a career; those who want to prepare for graduate school in landscape architecture; and those who wish to refine their skills for work with conservation groups, historic preservation commissions, and planning boards.” Four areas of study made up the core of the program: history, design, landscape construction, and plant materials—the basics of a landscape design education.

In 1970 the program, known as the Radcliffe Seminars in Landscape Design, held its first graduation ceremony, with six of its original two dozen students earning certificates. The curriculum soon expanded under the leadership of fellow Bunting Institute alumna Beatrice Petit-Barron to include site engineering, drafting, natural systems, and other technical training that prepared graduates to make not only gardens but significant contributions to local planning boards, conservation agencies, and other areas of community need. Over time a number of alumni launched highly visible and successful careers, earning the Seminars a distinguished reputation for innovation and leadership in landscape design education.

In 1999 Radcliffe College merged with Harvard University to become the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. With its mission shifted to postgraduate research, the Radcliffe Institute sought a new home for its instructional offerings, inviting the Arnold Arboretum to accept administrative responsibility for its program in landscape design. Known today as the Landscape Institute, the program is now integral to the Arboretum’s education mission.

Under the leadership of John Furlong, director for twenty-five years, the Institute is growing in some important

new directions. One is geographic—a required move from Cronkhite Hall has led to new quarters at nearby 29 Garden Street.

A more important transition concerns the training of landscape designers, and recognition of changes occurring within the profession that require a curriculum as dynamic as the medium itself. The growing call for sustainable landscapes and a design ethic that considers longer-term environmental impacts have become increasingly important priorities for both the Landscape Institute and the Arnold Arboretum. New offerings in plant science, ecology, land-use history, and related subjects will draw on the Arboretum’s scientific expertise to better prepare students for the greener future so necessary for our world’s welfare.

Other plans focus on strengthening the larger profession through presentation of courses, projects, and information that communicate the special aims and capabilities of the landscape designer. This important role for the Institute will find particular voice through exploration of historic landscape preservation, ecological restoration, and other growing specialties that call upon the combined knowledge of plants, people, and design that distinguishes many of the program’s graduates.

The current strengths of the Landscape Institute bode well for its success in accepting these and other challenges. Presently sixty percent of the faculty has more than ten years of teaching experience in the program, and a strong vision for how instruction can be further enhanced. Student enrollment has been at 300-plus for the last six years, spread over a curriculum that currently offers sixty-eight courses taught by thirty-two instructors. The program has been recognized by public and private institutions, and its students, graduates, and faculty have received numerous awards for projects and professional work.

With these ample strengths, the Landscape Institute will complement the Arboretum’s commitment to generating new knowledge in plant biology with programs that further our understanding of the role of plants in the human environment.