

The A.E. Bye Land Surveys

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Abstract

In 2015, with the generous support of Dumbarton Oaks' Garden and Landscape Studies Project Grant, measured topographic surveys were conducted to document two seminal residential landscapes designed by the twentieth century landscape architect Arthur Edwin Bye (1919-2001). Mr. Bye did not execute his work through the conventional grading plan nor were "as built" drawings produced upon a projects completion. Consequently, documentation of his designs does not exist beyond his photographs. The surveys of two significant undocumented landscapes for the Wilson Residence (completed in the 1990's), in Carlisle, Massachusetts, and the Pittman Residence (completed in the 1980's), in Falls Village, Connecticut, reveal subtle grading methods that embody Mr. Bye's work and allow for further analysis of Bye's snowy landscapes that were identified from previous research by the author.

Introduction

The 20th Century landscape architect A.E. Bye designed residential landscape inspired by their indigenous temporal qualities. In the only book he authored of his design work, *Art into Landscape, Landscape into Art*, Bye presented twenty projects with the first chapter dedicated to the iconic Soros Residence in Southampton, New York. He described the subtle molding of undulating ground at the Soros Residence as a coordinated effort between the bulldozer and landscape architect to shape shadows and abstract patterns of melting snow.

The landscape's abstract patterns of melting snow in winter are similar as those we see a million-fold on fields and meadows. Here is a startling manifestation, not only of molding land, but of nature, too. We can call this a happy accident, of course, but we, as landscape architects, should not be too surprised, if we are all observant, by the seasonal changes. Each thaw brings new abstractions. And if we design for this, couldn't we call this a timeless aspect of our art? (Art into Landscape, Landscape into Art, p. 1).

The Soros Residence is an example of Bye's snowy landscape typology, which he developed further with his design of, among others, Cowles, Massachusetts Seaside Landscape, Benton, Meltzer, Pittman and Wilson Residences – the latter two being the subject of this report.

The author completed prior research on Bye's method of work to accomplish his landscape contouring during an Archival Research Fellowship at Pennsylvania State University. Also, several interviews from Bye's clients, contractors, employees and colleagues confirmed insights to the site-directed manner of work that Bye preferred. In addition, the author visited and photographed over twenty-five of Bye's

landscapes. These inquiries have identified three distinctive attributes of snowy landscapes designed by A.E. Bye: Abstraction, Surface, and Mantle. The attributes commence with the shaping of the ground.

Mr. Bye admitted that he designed by intuition rather than by intellect. Consequently, the grading of a site was not resolved beforehand. Contractors were instructed to deliver yardage of sand, gravel, loam, and topsoil to a site. Then, as was done at the Soros Residence, the execution of subtle and precise land formations would be directed by the landscape architect on site in a process that often took several weeks, even months – during which time it was not uncommon for Bye to reside with the client. Several of Bye’s clients and contractors recount how the landscape architect directed the grading process by editing the work within fractions of inches to achieve the desired result. While Mr. Bye documented his work with his highly regarded photographs, this “gardeners approach” to design left no measured grading plans for many of these landscapes which are currently at risk as the sites are acquired by a second generation of owners.

Snowy Attributes

Abstraction is directly related to the snowmelt pattern of the undulating ground plane. The undulations, mounds and depressions, also serve to retain the snow as it melts and recharges the groundwater. The patterns are further influenced by temperature, sun location, and soil characteristics. The iconic image of the Soros Residence completed in the 1960’s is an example of Abstraction (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Soros Residence*, Southampton, New York / Abstraction
Photo by A.E. Bye Courtesy of the Pennsylvania State University Archives

Surface is the canvas of snow that intercepts and bends shadows that wash across the landscape in high contrast amplified silhouettes. This attribute is directly related to vertical elements and particularly to Bye's careful placement of trees and editing of existing vegetation on the site. *Surface* is illustrated in the image from *Massachusetts Seaside Landscape*, completed in the 1980's (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Massachusetts Seaside Landscape*, Wareham, Massachusetts / *Surface*.
Photo by Kimberly Mercurio

Mantle is the volume of snow that consumes and transforms the landscape. An image of the Ha Ha and surrounding landscape at *Gainesway Farm*, completed in the 1970's, is an example of *Mantle* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Gainesway Farm*, Lexington, Kentucky / *Mantle*.
Photo by A.E. Bye Courtesy of Pennsylvania State University Archives

Topographic Surveys and Future Investigations

Topographic surveys of measured 6" contour intervals were executed for two of Bye's influential projects in 2015, for the Wilson Residence, in Carlisle, Massachusetts (Figure 4) and the Pittman Residence in Falls Village, Connecticut (Figure 5) .

As a result of this research further analysis and measured drawings will be developed to illustrate the temporal conditions and the snowy attributes identified in the landscapes of A. E. Bye.

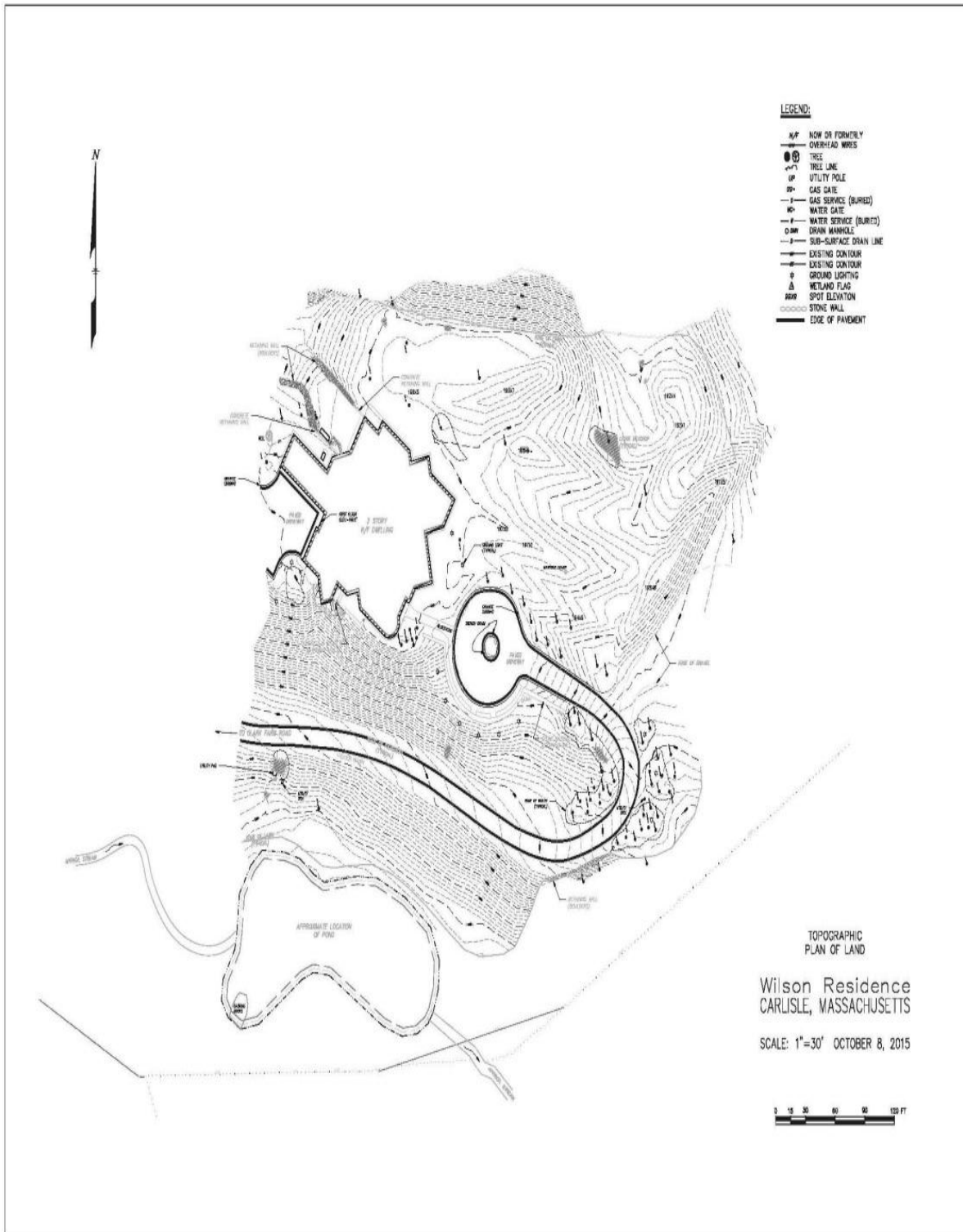


Figure 4. Wilson Residence – Topographic Survey



Figure 5. Pittman Residence – Topographic Survey