

Design Special

GARDENS THAT WERE NEVER BUILT

Most of us would give almost anything to have our gardens laid out by one of the great designers – a Humphry Repton terrace perhaps, or a Gertrude Jekyll flower border. So it is always a surprise to find that some historical plans, even by the most sought-after designers, exist only on paper, and never became reality. How can such opportunities have been passed up? What could have happened between designer and client that meant the proposals were abandoned? What inspirational places have we lost because these gardens were never built?



In an occasional series for *Gardens and People*, landscape historian Jill Sinclair will look at some of these unrealised garden plans. Here she explores why one mature design by an American master was not installed, and allows us to muse on what we can still learn from this fascinating example of his work.

GENIUS DISTILLED: AN UNREALISED DAN KILEY DESIGN FOR A TINY RESIDENTIAL PLOT

Daniel Urban Kiley (1912–2004) is often described as the foremost American landscape designer of the twentieth century. In his long career he designed a range of public and private landscapes throughout America, as well as important projects in Europe and Asia. His most famous designs include the iconic Miller garden in Columbus, Indiana, a beautifully sleek private garden that was the first modern landscape to be designated a US National Historic Landmark. Other award-winning designs include the pioneering landscape on the roof of California's Oakland Museum, and the wonderful garden refuge at the Art Institute of Chicago, (see **Figure 1**).



Jill Sinclair, 2002

Figure 1 Dan Kiley's urban retreat, designed in the early 1960s for the Art Institute of Chicago. This award-winning courtyard displays a characteristic sense of movement created by patterns of light and shade, and Kiley's masterful use of the asymmetrical grid to shape and define the space.

Kiley's wish was always to pare down a design to its simplest, purest form. He often explained that he was seeking to capture the essence of a walk in nature, the feeling of somewhere exciting, fresh and changing spatially each time it was experienced. For his urban designs, this meant creating a dynamic space that showed the hand of human order, not trying to make (in a disparaging phrase he often used) "little copies of nature." He saw his work, while quintessentially modern, as a link back to the classical landscapes of Le Nôtre in the way it used strong geometric patterns of trees and structures to create and shape space. Many of his designs were arranged in an asymmetrical grid, which picked up the shapes and massing of the surrounding architecture and thus integrated buildings and landscape. The ensuing rhythmic repetition and asymmetric balance are some of the defining features of his work.

I have fond memories of spending a Spring morning in 2002 with Kiley at his Vermont home. It was part of my research for a piece on his work at Lincoln Center, an award-winning design that has since sadly been dismantled. We talked about the project and I spent several hours reviewing the firm's files. He made clear his frustration at the way his planting of plane trees at Lincoln Center had recently been condemned as unsuitable, and replaced without his involvement or knowledge. In discussion, Kiley was charming and lively – if rather deaf, which made the conversation somewhat one-sided. I was struck by his praise for the skills of others (he was just completing work on the landscape at the Milwaukee Art Museum extension and was full of admiration for its Spanish architect, Santiago Calatrava). Like many, I was greatly saddened by Kiley's death in 2004, and by news of the subsequent destruction of nearly all his papers when his family home burnt down in a great storm.

A couple of years later the city of Cambridge Historical Commission asked me to identify and examine significant private gardens in the heart of that historic Massachusetts city. It was slow, often frustrating, research, trying to locate poorly documented gardens from old client lists, partial addresses, or tantalising but unlabelled photographs. While none of the featured designs in Kiley's *Complete Works of America's Master Landscape Architect* were in Cambridge, I was intrigued to find a single line entry in the list of his projects that recorded a 1995 landscape for the "Phelan House, Cambridge (MA)." No-one seemed to know where or what this project was, and it took some months, and several happy coincidences, to identify the property, which turned out to be an unassuming mid-nineteenth century house on Foster Street.

Although his designs were usually for large sites, late in his career Kiley had produced a plan for this tiny plot in Cambridge. The house was owned by Ellen Phelan, the New York painter who had recently been appointed as professor of the practice of studio arts at the Visual and Environmental Studies Department in Harvard's Carpenter Center. (She was later made director and chair of the department.) Kiley knew Phelan and her husband, sculptor Joel Shapiro, and had recently designed a splendid garden for them at their home in Westport, in upstate New York. On that forty-acre site on the shores of Lake Champlain, Kiley sought to create a landscape that unified its various disparate structures, including the main prairie-style house, into their dramatic lake and forest setting.

Phelan now invited Kiley to design something for the much more modest grounds around her new Cambridge home (**Figure 2**). The entire plot was barely 2,000 square foot, much of that taken up by the simple clapboard house. At the front was a small strip of land between the house and road, with a driveway and carport to the right. Access to the rear yard lay through the carport and a gate and fence, with the basement steps immediately behind the fence and, beyond that, the back door to the house. The shady rear yard was a rather haphazard shape (simply the residue left after the house had been constructed) and, apart from a few trees on the boundary, largely covered by brick pavers.

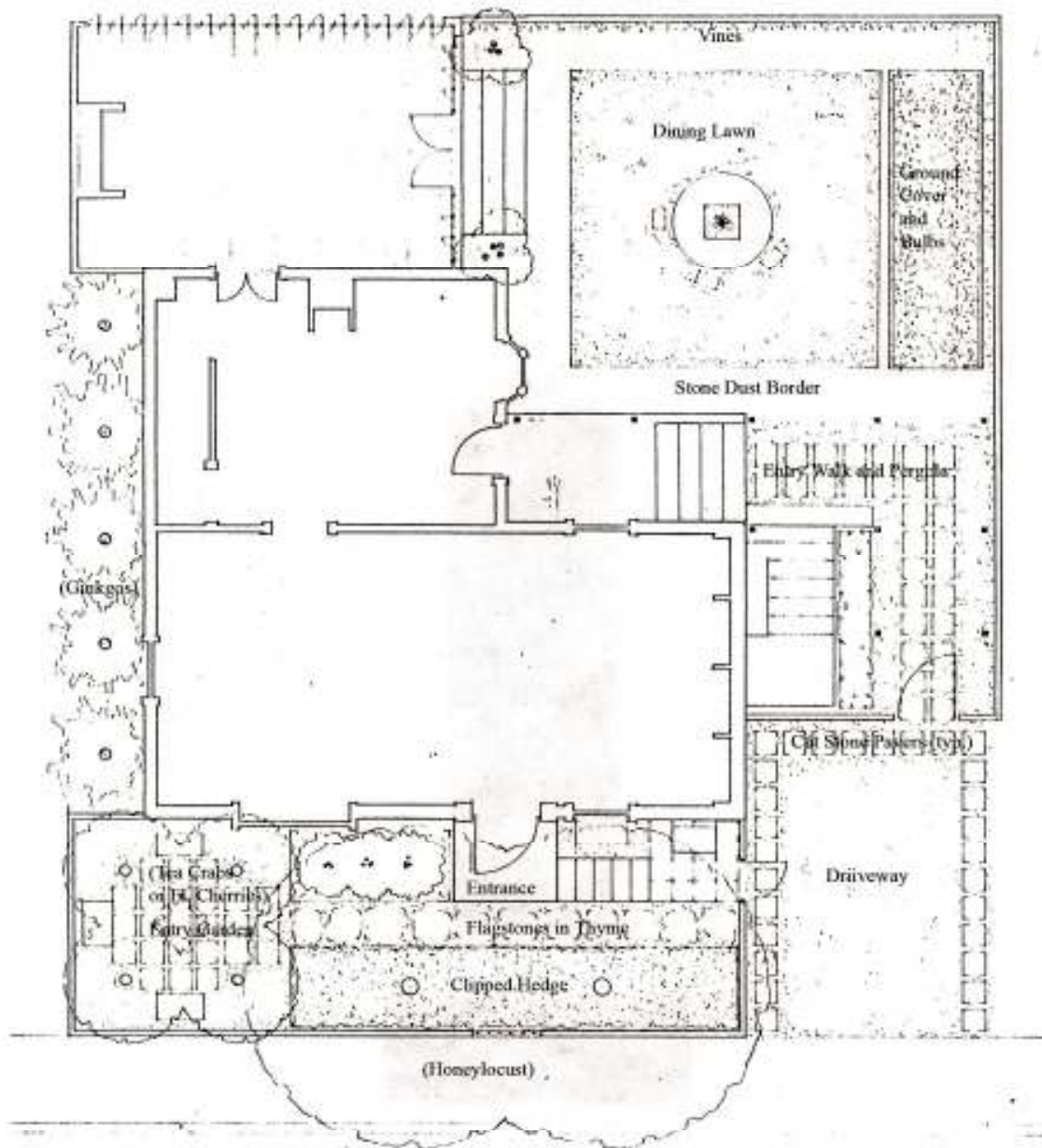


Figure 3. The schematic plan for the Phelan House, Office of Dan Kiley, 1995, with labels added in 2006 by Jane Amidon, indicating Kiley's design intent. Credit: Image courtesy of Jane Amidon.

wasted space that ran along the left side of the house was to be planted with a row of five fastigiata ginkgo trees, to provide dramatic year-round structure. A simple path of flagstones surrounded by thyme (for its scent when crushed underfoot) ran across the front yard, linking the driveway, main entrance, and entry garden.

Between the gate into the rear yard and the back door, Kiley proposed an L-shaped entry walk, covered by a large pergola. This bold gesture would transform the awkward area formed by the basement steps into a major feature of the property. It welcomed visitors, helped direct their movement through the space and, with its patterns of light and shade, provided a sense of dynamism and movement, even in this small plot. It also signified a new focus for the yard: the main structure had previously been the carport, providing protection for an automobile; the new pergola

offered shade and shelter for the human visitor.

Beyond the entry walk, the backyard had shed the impression of being residual space: it was now a functional, elegant square. A dining lawn with table and chairs was to be its focal point. The lawn was framed on three sides by a stone dust border. On its fourth side, a rectangular bed of ground cover planting and bulbs offered horticultural interest, even in such a shady spot. The careful geometric combination of lawn and planting bed provided a hint of the asymmetric grid patterning for which Kiley was renowned. Climbing plants covered the boundary fences, turning the space into an intimate green enclosure. To the left, steps defined on either side by low planting led up to the proposed new summerhouse. Deceptively simple, the design thus proposed beautiful, functional spaces for the client and revealed many of the hallmarks of Dan Kiley's mature style.

Phelan later decided to make more substantial changes to the house, planning to add a two-storey extension. Kiley's proposed design would no longer work in the re-ordered space and the architects' plans now suggested the narrow plot would consist of a meandering path through ground cover plants, leading to a new back door and a small shed. The building extension was approved in March 2001. Sadly for Phelan, her relationship with Harvard had soured by this time and she was controversially removed as departmental chair. Soon after, she sold the Cambridge house. Neither the extension nor the Kiley landscape design were to be implemented, and the new owners brought in contractors who simply spruced up the existing design with new brick pavers and fencing (see **Figures 4 and 5**). All that remains of Kiley's design is the copy of his plan, and the memories of those involved in the discussions. It still provides a fascinating glimpse of how even an unremarkable, tiny plot such as the one on Foster Street, Cambridge, could be transformed by the hand of a master of landscape design.

© Jill Sinclair 2010



Figures 4 and 5.

Jill Sinclair, 2002

The house at Foster Street after it was sold by Ellen Phelan, the plans for a Dan Kiley garden abandoned.

The author is grateful to Jane Amidon and Catherine Lassen for their help, and to the Cambridge Historical Commission in Massachusetts, which funded the research for this article. Information on this and other significant gardens will appear in the Commission's forthcoming book *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development*, to be published by The MIT Press. To contact Jill about this article, or learn more about her work, please visit www.jillsinclair.net

In the next article in this series, Jill Sinclair will explore a Capability Brown plan implemented for the first time over 200 years after his death.