n the fall of 2020, Jennifer Ott from HistoryLink.org interviewed Iain Robertson, Adjunct Professor Emeritus of Landscape Architecture at the UW College of the Environment, as part of the UW Botanic Gardens’ ongoing Oral History Project. Following is an edited excerpt from the first of two interviews.

**JO:** I thought I would begin with the Center for Urban Horticulture [CUH] and ask you a few questions about the elements of the landscape there. You worked with the Jones & Jones firm in the late 1980s on that?

**IR:** That’s right. I was a landscape architect with them before I started working at the University of Washington. I designed the McVay Courtyard, Goodfellow Grove, the original Entry Shade Garden, and, actually, the layout of the roads.

**JO:** Great. Let’s start with the McVay Courtyard. Can you describe to me the important elements of the plant palette there?

**IR:** I talked a lot with Betty [Elisabeth C.] Miller about the plants. She was instrumental in the selection of the trees. [Five fern-leaf moon maples, *Acer japonicum ‘Aconitifolium’, anchored the original plantings.]

And I was involved in thinking about what we were trying to convey with the plants. I had in mind two of what I think of as rivers running from either side of the courtyard to Merrill Hall.

One river represented the planters: the people who went out into the world collecting plants and introducing them into horticulture. The other river represented people who studied the plants. One was the art, the other, the science. The idea was that, as you walk through the courtyard, you follow one of those rivers into the building, and they merge inside.

I laid out the monocots—the grass-like plants—so that the leaves related to the color...
of the stones that I put in as rivers. We used big rocks to protect the inner courtyard plantings. Harold Tukey [the director at the time] was concerned that when people entered the courtyard and saw somebody sitting in the middle, they might think it was fully occupied. So, we arranged the shape of it to accommodate multiple people, with seating available on the low walls that formed the curves of the flowing rivers.

JO: Who worked with you on the rock arrangements?
IR: Marenakos Rock Center [in Preston, near Issaquah]. It was coming on winter, and they showed me this huge rockslide and said, “Pick the rocks you want.” So I just went around and said, “I’ll take this, this, this, and this,” and the idea was that the rocks would hold the soil up and make a bowl shape of the courtyard topography. Visitors could sit on the rocks but they would be encouraged not to walk diagonally across the sitting space.

JO: So, it’s sort of like a passive protection. You don’t have to have any sort of obvious barriers, but it sort of guides people almost subconsciously.
IR: That’s a good way of describing it, yes. And while Marenakos were placing the two big rocks at the entrance to the courtyard, I asked could they raise them up so they look like two hands holding each other. In my mind, I always think of the painting [“Praying Hands”] from the Middle Ages by Albrecht Dürer.

I didn’t want people to think, “God, I have to pray now.” That wasn’t the intention. It was to make it as welcoming as possible while also nudging people to go to either side, rather than straight across.

JO: Interesting. I like that there’s a gesture in the rocks, almost.
IR: And then on the other side, I placed evergreen shrubs in such a way as to evoke a Chinese watercolor painting, with the rocks being the big mountains and the shrubs being the lowland hills. So, there are these different ways of thinking of the rocks. That was meaningful to me as a designer but it wasn’t something I wanted to force down the visitors’ throats. People don’t have to understand my reasoning for the metaphors because the design is more intended to be functional, useful.

JO: That’s amazing. Has the courtyard landscape design matured as you expected it to, or is there anything that surprised you about how it’s changed over time?

IR: I tell students that plants do one of two things: They either grow bigger than you want them to be, or they die, which is to say, you cannot really anticipate what they’re going to do. But the planting has worked well. We’ve made some changes and renovations along the way. It’s at the point now where the maples are really too large for the root space. And at some point somebody needs to come in and replace them with something else.

People are always reluctant to do that because things reach their maturity and you say, “Oh, wow, this is great.” Then a few years beyond that, you realize that the plants are in decline. In the not too distant future, we are going to have to take out the trees. I think the rocks will stay forever, but the plants are not forever. They do well, and then it’s time to change. And I think now that we’re coming into a period of very obvious change to the climate, we need to think about planting for different environmental conditions and demonstrating to people the value of plants for the new era of climate change.

JO: I’m involved with Olmsted parks in Seattle, and one of the discussions that comes up a lot is tree maturation and aging out. Do you prefer to do one tree at a time so that it becomes sort of a staggered renewal? Or do you think that it’s preferable to take all of the trees that are the same era and replace them en masse so that you then get another coming up of a new stand of trees?

IR: I think it depends on the context, the plants, and the politics. Generally, staging things so that they are not all done as big changes is more preferable. It’s important to remember that planting design is not a static thing that you do. It’s something you put in place that will change over time, and you just tinker with it. Architects don’t understand that because they think you do a building once and it’s done. It might be true for the bricks and mortar, but the planting design is made of living things, so you’re constantly responding to what the life is doing.

JO: Can you tell me about the Goodfellow Grove project—who you worked with and how you came to work on it?

IR: Harold Tukey kept me on after I finished at Jones & Jones and had started working half-time at the UW. He asked me to do a design for the grove, which is a memorial for a tragedy. Jack Goodfellow was a pilot, and he crashed a plane, and his wife, Marilou, was killed in the crash. Mr. Goodfellow wanted something that would commemorate her love of plants, and of the mountains. I said we really couldn’t do a mountain design in this lowland area, so I persuaded them to make a swale that, again, had a functional purpose: moving water from that area into the lake.

JO: Oh, so it cleans the water as it goes through.

IR: Yes. The idea was that water from the roof of the CUH would go into the swale and be cleaned by the plants, and then go into Lake Washington. It wasn’t fully realized, but I think the planting design worked well in terms of what the Goodfells wanted. I suggested that we install all native plants around the swale, in part as a recognition of the plants of the region that the Goodfells were interested in.

JO: What year were you doing that design?

IR: I don’t remember exactly [circa 1990], but I know for certain that I drew the design on the back of a folder while listening to a lecture in a meeting on the East Coast. I’d been thinking about it for a long, long time, and I finally had an idea of what shape it really should take. I also have somewhere the drawing of the courtyard that I did on the back of a yellow pad on the way home from the office.

JO: So you just kind of chew on an idea and then find a moment where you let it come onto the paper?
IR: That happens very much to designers. It’s more than chew on it. It sort of takes over your whole life. Everything you look at, everything you see, everything you talk about relates to the design that’s germinating in your mind. And then, when the time has come, it sort of sprouts and starts to grow.

JO: Oh, that’s interesting. How did you pick the trees that are outside of the actual swale?

IR: Well, they were all natives, and the ones in the grid [the serviceberries, *Amelanchier × grandiflora*] are flowery. And we were picking plants, again, that did well in that sort of soil and microclimate.

JO: And with so much water, right? That’s got to be very damp?

IR: It was totally, totally hard clay. It’s awful, awful stuff—and now as we speak, the trees need to be replaced. Not because it was a mistake, but just because things have changed, and the trees have grown too big. I would love to see that grove replaced.

JO: Would you just take one tree out, put a new one in?

IR: No, this is a case where you would do the whole thing. It was a grove and it was meant to be formal [connecting the formal plantings of the CUH with the informal native plantings of the Union Bay Natural Area]. The plants were meant to be similar in age and size. And so, in this case, you wouldn’t take out all the shrubs around there, but the plants on the grid would definitely be replaced at the same time.

JO: And then how did you come to choose the site furnishings: the bridge and the rock bench?

IR: Well, again, we were working with Marenakos, and we designed as we worked with them. They did the walls along the edges of the swale, and we had designed a very small, cheap wooden bridge. And the folks at Marenakos said, nah, let us put our slab there. Because they really got into the design, they donated it without us asking. They were fabulous.

JO: That’s amazing. Has the use of the grove been what you envisioned the public experience of it to be?

IR: Well, I think yes and no. Yes, it fits in with the wilder part...beyond CUH...Union Bay. But we never got to regrade areas beyond the grove. I did a design—a very quick one—but there were never funds for that. And there are still the remains of the old road, which needs to be just obliterated. It would be wonderful to work the grounds into a series of mounds and dips that would allow people to sit in the amphitheaters or whatever the spaces become. And it would help with the drainage.

So, the point was not to do something just for aesthetic reasons but also to focus on function so that we could actually make a usable, useful space—one that would look good, perform an important service, and not be muddy.

Jennifer Ott is an environmental historian and the assistant director of HistoryLink.org, an online encyclopedia of state and local history in Washington State. Her most recent book is “Olmsted in Seattle: Creating a Park System for a Modern City” (History Link/Documentary Media LLC, 2019).