

# A MAN OF AFFAIRS :

## Peter Walker Speaking on James Burnett and the Future of Landscape Architecture

INTERVIEWED BY FALON MIHALIC

Talking to Peter Walker about landscape architecture is opening a book—or several—on the subject. His career spans six decades and multiple continents with major commissions: the Nasher Sculpture Garden in Dallas and the 9/11 Memorial Plaza in Manhattan. His expertise comes from a deep awareness of the profession’s history and how it has been influenced by the art and environmental movements of the past century.

Walker places the work of James Burnett, winner of the 2016 ASLA Design Medal and a landscape architect whose practice, The Office of James Burnett, was founded in Houston in 1989, within a 300-year-old lineage of design. This lineage sets the stage on which landscape architecture, and Burnett’s contributions to the profession, can best be understood.

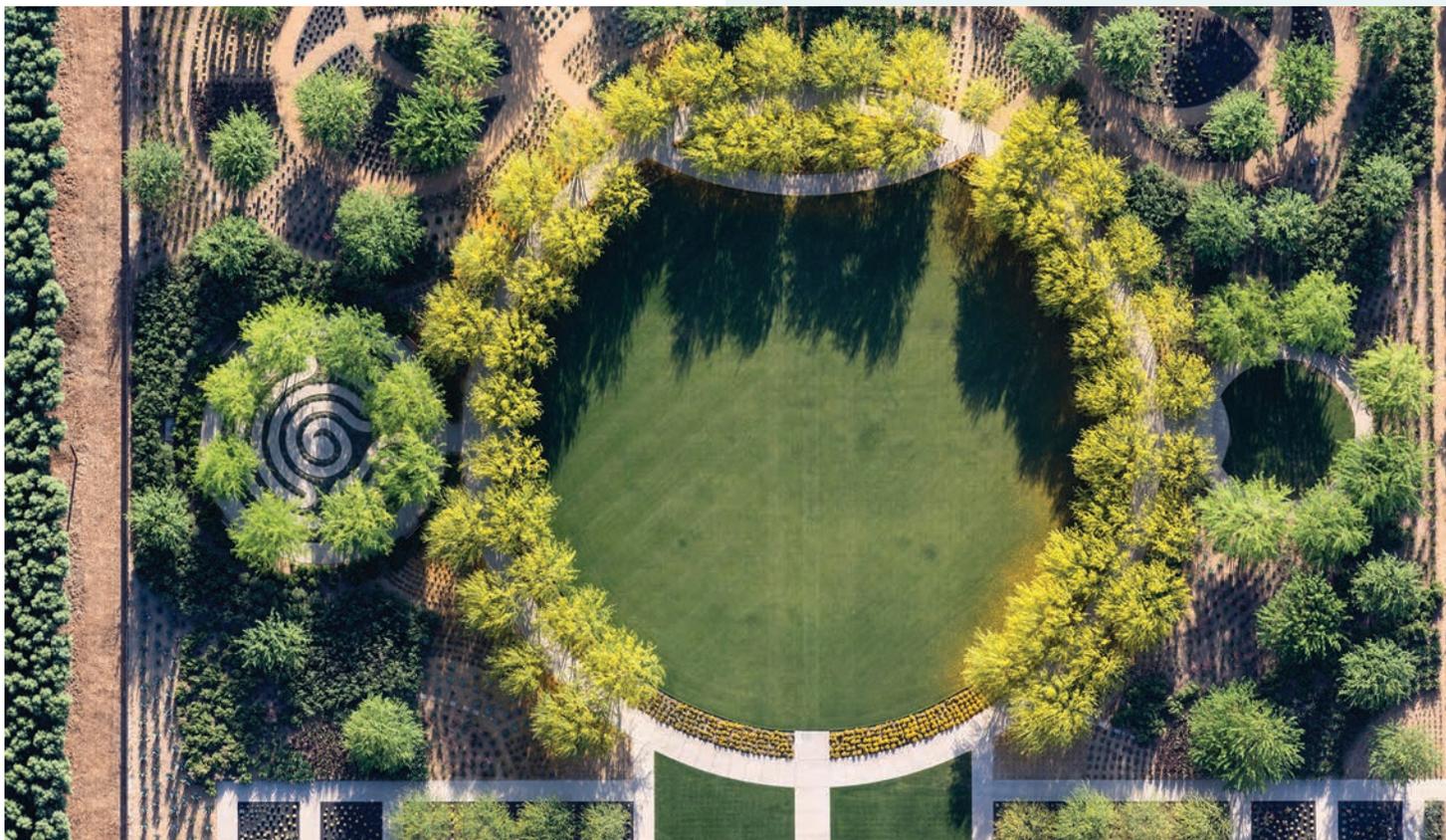
He attributes part of Burnett’s success to the way his work blends various influences while producing programmable outdoor public spaces.

Burnett often employs flatness, a device that can be traced to Andre Le Notre’s seventeenth-century French royal gardens at Versailles and Vaux-le-Vicomte; Le Notre famously employed flatness across slightly stepped terraces to create a forced perspective on an axial vista. Le Notre’s rigorous geometry inspired the first wave of modernist landscape designers, including Dan Kiley, Thomas Church, and Garrett Eckbo. These designers evolved the profession toward spaces defined by geometry and borrowed ideas about figure-ground relationships from Abstract Expressionism, as Kiley’s relentless grid of trees surrounded by water at Fountain Place in Dallas shows.

The profession evolved again with the publication of Ian McHarg’s *Design with Nature*, a book that pioneered ecological planning and natural systems thinking. In Burnett’s work, the influence of both McHarg and modernism are evident; plants are used as ecological agent and design material by massing in thick grids.

Today, the profession is focused on design that is context-sensitive and program-driven—consider Discovery Green by Hargreaves Associates. Burnett’s projects, too, feel effortlessly integrated into their context. Maybe the best example of these ideas coming together is in the landscape design at Brochstein Pavilion on the Rice University campus. The ground is designed as a series of plinths that subtly delineate between interlocking spaces. The grid of Lacebark Elms and spiky rectangles of Horsetail add a botanical richness while creating a connection between the Pavilion and its context. The result is a multilayered, dynamic environment defined by recognizable geometry.

Landscape architecture has to be viewed through the lens of time. Individual projects and the broader movements or “lines of inquiry” within the profession can be evaluated only over time, because landscape, at its core, is a discipline of change and context. Burnett’s work is rooted in precedent while remaining inventive and expressive to meet the needs of landscapes and the people who inhabit them today.



Sunnylands Center + Gardens (Office of James Burnett, 2012)



Sunnylands Center (architecture, Frederick Fisher and Partners, 2012)

**FW:** *We are talking about James Burnett and his win of the 2016 ASLA Design Medal. How does his work with The Office of James Burnett, or OJB, fit into the canon of American landscape architecture?*

**PW:** I would call Jim part of the third wave of modernism. If you start out with Church<sup>1</sup> and Eckbo<sup>2</sup> as the first, and my generation of Haag<sup>3</sup> and Hargreaves<sup>4</sup> as the second, Jim is in the next generation.

And what's the difference between these generations? I think the major difference between the second and third was the McHargian<sup>5</sup> influence that trickled down into practice. It's not that our generation didn't know anything about it, but it was more ideological than it was practical. There was not a series of consultants who provided those services. The third group of modernists were almost eclipsed by environmental interests to the point where they were less involved in formal solutions than ecologically correct solutions. That's not a criticism, that's just to separate these generations.

Jim was one of the few of his generation interested in formal issues. He knew about ecology, he knew about water. He also knew about plant material, but he often used plants for their visual quality rather than simply for their natural or ecological quality. That's a distinction of that generation.

**FW:** *What is the significance of his practice to the profession, and why is he deserving of the ASLA Design Medal?*

**PW:** In his generation he is one of the standouts. I think he's a standout for a number of reasons. One, of course, is the design, and then the amalgamation or integration of McHargian thought. He has a distinct design voice that doesn't have its roots in my generation.

The other is that he's become a man of affairs. He is one of the few who have taken part in the life of the profession. He's on the CEO Roundtable, he's involved with ASLA, the design competitions. He's not just a new design voice representing his generation, he's also taking on the responsibilities of my generation, which is sort of dying out, really. We're no longer involved in those things, and Jim is one of the heirs to that.

I think he's important as a designer and important politically. I mean that in the good sense, in the participation in the affairs of the profession. Both of those are important. It isn't just the work alone, it's the work, plus the professional life you lead where you are influencing others. Not just your peers—though he's been very influential with his peers—but influencing the public at large and sometimes the political public as well.

The Design Medal, for us, the designers, is one of the most important ones. It is the medal for design. If you gave the Design Medal to an academic or to a park administrator, I would be upset. Because it's the only thing of its sort. The Gold Medal you could win for a number of different reasons. But the Design Medal you win for design. The reason I think it's great that Jim's got it is that it's a particular award for a particular activity. And it's an activity that I love and think is important. Look at the people who have won it. He's now a part of an important group.

**FW:** *What sets the work of OJB apart? What does he do that's special or different compared to previous medal winners, like Michael Van Valkenburgh<sup>6</sup> or Kathryn Gustafson<sup>7</sup>?*

**PW:** Of course, neither Kathryn nor Michael are in his generation—they are quite a bit older. But I think one of the things that's distinct is that Jim did his apprenticeship in an architectural office. He is very much in tune not only to the architecture of the time when he was apprenticing, but also to the new movements of architecture today.

I think one of the first things one would say about Jim is his work with very good architects—not household names, but important designers. That makes his work distinct. It's to some extent less self-centered and more collaborative. There are some of us who are very much creatures of the design world. But there are a number of others—Kathryn and Michael—who bring their own voice to it. I think they are less influenced by architecture and design and more influenced by landscape design, including their own. Or art or some other influence.

“My own feeling is that landscape should be visible. I disagree with the McHargian idea that you shouldn’t even know you were there. Landscape is a cultural phenomenon, and Jim believes that, too.”



Sunnylands and Rancho Mirage

**FM:** *In your letter of support for him to receive the ASLA design medal, you used the term “adventuresome” to describe his planting designs.*

**PW:** If you go look back at Sunnylands in Palm Springs—it’s a work of plants. It has geometry, and he’s working with a fine architect, but what’s really interesting is how the plants reinforce and elaborate and make more beautiful the basic geometric modes.

**FM:** *A commonality I see between your work and that of OJB is that it’s characterized by a rigorous and legible geometry. How do you think a clear geometry helps demonstrate the value and necessity of landscape architecture?*

**PW:** My own feeling is that landscape should be visible. I disagree with the McHargian idea that you shouldn’t even know you were there. Landscape is a cultural phenomenon, and Jim believes that, too. I think legibility has to do with how the public sees it, recognizing it as the hand of a person and not the hand of God.

I wouldn’t characterize Jim as just a formalist. For instance, if you look at his planting, it’s often not geometric. It’s often much more complex—almost like Sylvia Crowe<sup>8</sup>. He’s interested in plants for their own sake and particularly for their visual combinations; that way, he’s more like Kathryn.

None of us is unique. We’re part of movements. The way I judge uniqueness is by individual projects. You don’t judge Le Notre<sup>9</sup> on his worst projects, you judge him on his great projects. Or Olmsted, or anybody else. You have to judge their most important work.

**FM:** *The Brochstein Pavilion, for example, uses very precise grading to achieve an elegant separation of materials across interconnected spaces. Discuss the way OJB designs the ground as a series of planes that setup spatial relationships.*

**PW:** Well, you can go back and read my books! That comes out of the notion of flatness being a metaphysical thing for the Earth. I think Jim knows about that and uses that device. On the other hand, I think we are both influenced by the number of projects that are on structure. A rolling landscape is not the logical expression, and so he uses that base plane much the way we do. It’s not unique to Jim, but he’s part of that movement that is interested in those issues.

**FM:** *Why is this grading strategy effective—to work with planar surfaces?*

**PW:** There’s an ideal, an artistic ideal, which is represented in a number of landscape architects. It’s what Martha Schwartz<sup>10</sup> has been interested in for years. It’s what I’ve been into for years. It’s that line of inquiry that goes back to Le Notre. The fact that you’re on a line of inquiry doesn’t mean that your work isn’t individual or unique. You’re bringing something to it. It’s just like a painter paints something on a canvas. The fact that you’re using a canvas and some other painter is using a canvas—that’s not really important. That’s the basis. This idea of flatness. It’s what you put on the canvas. It’s what you do with it. That’s why I use that as a model.

**FM:** *Houston is having a renaissance of sorts in the realm of landscape architecture with newly opened and much celebrated public spaces. They have become so popular that they are creating more demand for usable, programmed outdoor space. OJB’s current project, Levy Park in Upper Kirby, is positioned to add to the growing number of fantastic public spaces opening in Houston. Like his other work, Levy Park is expected to be an instantly timeless landscape, one that will be very well used. How does OJB consistently produce places that are successfully used by people?*

**PW:** Everybody is doing public spaces now because the culture is interested in public spaces. And now we have spaces that are famous in and of themselves. You think of Battery Park, the High Line, and Millennium Park. That is a function of our culture. Our culture is now interested in those. So if you work in that area and successfully produce an icon—then you become an ornament of that thinking. If someone was going to describe major public spaces today, it would be hard not to use these icons as examples. I think Jim is on the way to producing that. And that’s one strain.

The other strain is programming. He has come at a time when programming is new. It’s only 15 years old, or so, and it comes at exactly the time of his maturity. So he uses that. The public thinks they come to places because they are popular—that’s half true. It’s more true that they remember things because they are formally beautiful. The other side of it is that they have active programs. The best example of that is Battery Park, where you took a renovation of a historic park and turned it into a popular event. That’s what’s going on in the park in Dallas. It’s what the profession is now dealing with. It’s one of the cultural novelties—I don’t mean novelty in the sense that it’s not important. I think it’s very important, but it’s new.



**FW:** *Klyde Warren Park in Dallas—which won a ULI Award—is a prime example of how landscape architecture can catalyze placemaking while fitting snugly into the urban fabric of a city. Your work, the Nasher Sculpture Garden, is a stone’s throw from Klyde Warren Park. So, I’m interested to hear: How has that park changed the relationship of Nasher visitors to the sculpture garden and the surrounding neighborhood?*

**PW:** Well, I mean, there are some negative things (*laughs*). It affects the Nasher in ways—that highrise building that’s throwing light into the garden. There are some negative things about it. I personally think it’s impossible to separate things entirely in cities. Part of the whole idea of everybody returning to the city is that it’s an amalgamation. It’s a big stew and everything is in it, and you’re stirring it up. You have to take the various pieces and fit them together. The Nasher is not just the Nasher—it is part of the art center. There are six institutions that the Nasher participates in, and there are public spaces in all of them.

That’s interesting, because in New York, for instance, you might have a cluster of museums, but you rarely have a cluster of public spaces. [Klyde Warren Park] is part of that cluster of spaces. It’s next to a whole arts district, and it participates in that.

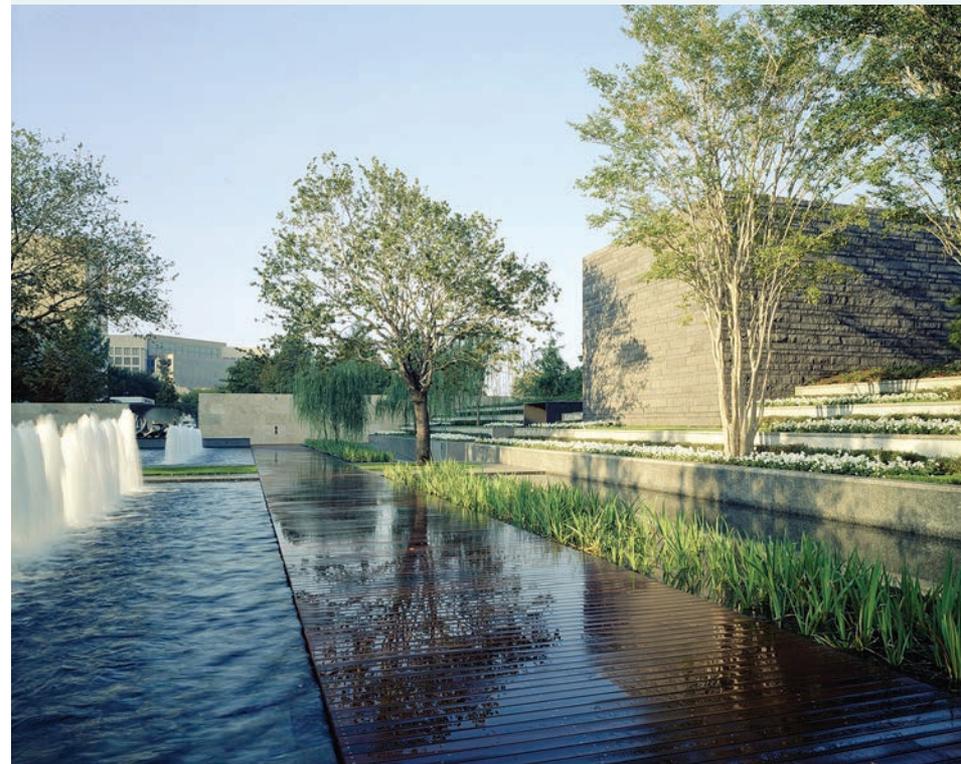
The Nasher is programmed, but it’s very slow. The shows are every six weeks or three months. You go to the park over the freeway, and there’s a program going on every two hours—something different. You are consciously programming what is going on there, and it makes the place interesting, but it’s done at a higher key and in a more popular way. At the Nasher you are trying to get people into a cloister to contemplate art. It’s like a museum. At the park you are trying to bring everybody in and mix them up so they have a good time. The mood of the park is a kind of Saturday morning or Saturday afternoon festival. It’s like going to the fair.

All these things make the city better and more interesting. You go into [Klyde Warren], and it’s like going into Millennium Park or the High Line. It’s also the kind of life that’s lived at the 9/11 Memorial<sup>11</sup>—people coming and mixing with each other in different moods.

I think one of the test of these things—like it’s always been—how many come? What do they do? How much do they like it? And do they take care of it over time? Does it become institutionalized within the culture? Now what would fit into these things? In my mind, Versailles fits into it, Vaux-le-Vicomte fits into it, and the Tuileries fits into it. The fact that these are 300-years-old doesn’t mean they’re not part of that same kind of thing.

Jim is playing in what I consider to be the important area of design. It’s historic in that sense. And he’s caught onto that. He brings his own thing to that. His own sense of elegance, his own sense of play. We don’t know yet if these things are really icons. You can’t know. You have to wait 10 or 15, 20, maybe even a 100 years to see. Some of the Le Notre gardens fell into disrepair, and they were revived after the Second World War. They’re reviving Prospect and Central Parks right now, and they’re reviving Battery Park. Battery Park was essentially rebuilt. In some ways that’s my test. Tell me it’s thriving in 10 or 15 years, and I’ll admit you really have something. My guess is that these things will be thriving. Whether they become iconic is a question of time. There are lots of modern chairs, but only a few Eames chairs. Only time will tell. I would bet on Jim, though if he keeps going. I’m not sure—you’d have to ask him—I’m not sure whether he’s far enough along where he could point to one and say that’s my real contribution. As a particular thing. It’s hard to do that when you’re in the middle of the battle. <sup>C99</sup>

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TOP: Nasher Sculpture Center section, Renzo Piano Building Workshop (architecture), Peter Walker Associates (landscape), 2003. ABOVE: Nasher Fountain

- 1 Thomas Church, Landscape Architect, modernist, famous for his kidney-bean-shaped pools in California
- 2 Garrett Eckbo, Landscape Architect, modernist, wrote *Landscapes for Living*. Hugely influential.
- 3 Richard Haag, Landscape Architect, famous for designing Bloedel Reserve and Gas Works Park in Seattle.
- 4 George Hargreaves, landscape architect, famous for many large parks, designed Discovery Green.
- 5 Referencing Landscape Architect Ian McHarg and his seminal work *Design with Nature*, which pioneered natural systems planning and ecological design.
- 6 Landscape Architect famous for Tear Drop Park in NYC and current designer of the Menil campus landscape plan. Awarded the ASLA Design Medal in 2011.
- 7 Landscape Architect famous for the Lurie Garden in Millennium Park, Chicago, and the Princess Diana Memorial Fountain. Awarded the ASLA Design Medal in 2008.
- 8 Sylvia Crowe, Scottish landscape architect, famous for robust naturalistic planting designs using native plants.
- 9 Andre Le Notre, landscape architect, designed the park and gardens for the Palace of Versailles.
- 10 Landscape architect, famous for unconventional landscapes that are heavily influenced by fine art.
- 11 Referencing the 9/11 Memorial in NYC, which Walker designed.