

An aerial photograph of a large park with a winding road, surrounded by green trees and lawns. In the background, a city skyline is visible across a body of water under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

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# PRESERVATION APPROACHES CONNECT HISTORIC LANDSCAPES WITH MODERN NEEDS

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While historic preservation once focused on historic buildings or districts, the preservation ethos for the built environment has expanded to the landscapes that surround these places and provide context and common ground for local, regional, state, and national identities. Landscape architecture for historically significant spaces requires strategies that honor the site's original use and importance while leveraging opportunities to modernize. No matter the size or scope of a project, various preservation approaches have been used to improve historically significant sites—restoring to original design, blending reconstruction and preservation, and updating amenities to meet modern community needs and desires.

Historic landscapes provide a framework for users to directly connect to the past while enjoying a communal sense of place. They range from small gardens to national parks. Landforms can include expansive prairies, estate gardens, cemeteries, farms, quarries, suburbs, abandoned settlements, and more. The character of these landscapes can span from designed to natural, and from rural to urban, encompassing agricultural and industrial spaces.

“Issues like ADA accessibility, resiliency, and modern design standards must commonly be addressed while creating a connection to the past, retaining aesthetic character, and adhering to the owner’s requirements,” says Arthur Mullen, AICP, Preservation Planner at Wade Trim.

“By carefully weighting competing interests and local desires, history may be leveraged to create outcomes that better serve the community without adversely impacting the integrity and character of the historic resource.” While the details of each effort differ, examining a variety of examples regarding updates to historic landscapes can show how integration of historic preservation into the planning and design process can promote positive project results.



Image courtesy of The Henry Ford

### TRUE TO FORM, WITH A MODERN UPGRADE

At times, a granular level of adherence to period-specific materials and design is needed to fully retain a site's historic characteristics. This has been the case for a riverbank wall restoration project at Fair Lane: Home of Clara and Henry Ford in Dearborn, one of 42 National Historic Landmarks listed in Michigan. Wade Trim was contracted by the Henry Ford Estate, the nonprofit organization that owns and operates Fair Lane, to address deterioration of a 270-lineal-foot span of the riverbank wall. The project's detailed drawings and specifications require close adherence to the original construction of the wall to complete its restoration.

The estate's expansive landscape, designed by famous landscape architect Jens Jensen, originally encompassed 1,300 acres throughout the Ford residence, gardens, orchards, woods, and farm fields. Along the banks of the Rouge River, elements of Jensen's design are on display in the form of an in-river dam that created a naturalistic waterfall and beautiful stone ledge walls that provided access to the river. Due to flooding and erosion over time, portions of the riverbank wall deteriorated.

"We are taking great care to preserve the natural beauty and public enjoyment of Fair Lane," says Karen Marzonie, Director of Gardens and Grounds for Henry Ford Estate. "Along with preserving the beauty and sanctuary of Clara and Henry Ford's home, Fair Lane has additional importance due to its proximity to the Rouge River and associated linkage to other riparian properties, public greenways, and waterway trails."

Project specifications called for replacement of ledge stones to match the 100-year-old stone, repairs to concrete footers, and restoration to original condition after the improvements. To meet the Secretary of the Interior's standards for rehabilitation to only replace deteriorating features with in-kind replacements, a mortar mix that closely replicates the original composition was required. Furthering efforts to preserve historical authenticity, the project team studied a variety of historic records including photographs of exact locations. Existing stormwater systems on site were repaired with new outlets that extended to the river so current design standards could also be achieved.



All images courtesy of Wade Trim.

## COMMUNITY DRIVES MOBILITY STUDY OF BELLE ISLE PARK

Understanding the history of a site's landscape as well as the current desires of the client and community it serves is critical to improve any site with historical significance. The Belle Isle Multimodal Mobility Study, launched by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) in partnership with the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Belle Isle Conservancy, aims to enhance visitor access and travel throughout the historic, 982-acre Belle Isle Park. The park's original concept design was prepared by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1880s. Belle Isle provides views of Detroit and Canada and is home to several historically significant attractions such as the Belle Isle Aquarium, the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory, Dossin Great Lakes Museum, Belle Isle Nature Center, Detroit Yacht Club, Belle Isle Boat House, James Scott Memorial Fountain, and the new Ralph Wilson Gateway, which serves as the southern trailhead for Michigan's Iron Belle Trail. Since becoming a state park in 2014, Belle Isle has seen increased transportation network and parking demands. According to the MDNR, attendance has more than doubled from 2 million visitors in 2014 to over 5.6 million in 2023.

The Multimodal Mobility Study, led by Wade Trim, is expected to be complete in summer 2024. Recommendations incorporate a phased implementation strategy for innovative and sustainable improvements to the multimodal transportation network that will serve various modes of travel including vehicular, pedestrian, bicycle, and bus. Enhancements focus on traffic operations and safety throughout the park, providing a plan for additional wayfinding and improved parking, and limiting parking and pavement where it's not needed to preserve the park's natural, historical, and cultural resources.

The project team's robust public engagement strategy included an online survey, an open house with park users, and more than 20 stakeholder meetings. This transportation-focused study considered impacts on the park's cultural landscape, along with the routes users take to visit the many popular attractions. The approach led to streamlining the arrival of all transportation modes to the island, a people-focused Central Avenue with slowed traffic, potential bike share and ferry stop opportunities, and other

pedestrian-friendly improvements set to be outlined in the final report. Multimodalism was how Belle Isle was experienced by Detroiters prior to 1920, and the current recommendations can revitalize that balanced visitor transportation approach. For example, reinvigorating Central Avenue and reconnecting it west to the Scott Fountain will return a significant island asset to its historical multimodal use. The approach will be to retain the historic one-way feature on the outer road, enhance safety, and eliminate some non-historic roadways while converting most of the island's roads to two-way traffic.

"We appreciate the more than 3,000 responses to our public survey and more than 100 people who attended our public open house," shares Amanda Treadwell, Urban Area Field Planner for the MDNR Parks and Recreation Division. "The feedback really has helped drive the study team's recommendations. By focusing on multiple mobility upgrades, existing landmarks and natural features on the island will be preserved, enhanced, and remain accessible to all as the park's use continues to grow."







## MIXING PRESERVATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Maintaining the integrity of a historic resource is an important consideration when scoping and designing a project that may impact a historic landscape. A review of the site elements can reveal the signature features most critical for preservation, protection, or enhancement. Genesee County Parks and Recreation's Flint Riverfront Restoration project aims to transform a neglected resource into a healthy and vibrant community asset by fusing the technical elements of flood control with ecological restoration, public open space design, recreational boating, and redevelopment of underutilized land. Working with subconsultant Stantec, Wade Trim designed a series of interventions to strengthen the physical relationship between the Flint River and surrounding neighborhoods and the central business district through a green corridor network of public open spaces and parks. The wider Flint Riverfront Restoration Plan encompasses 230 acres of downtown riverfront land. Construction of 2 stream miles of in-river improvements is underway to promote enhanced recreation, ecology, and fish passage. With the final removal of the Hamilton Dam, 25 miles of river will be opened for fish passage. Riverbank Park, a 10-acre linear park on both sides of the river, was originally designed in the 1970s by notable landscape architect Lawrence Halprin's firm. A landmark feature of the Flint community landscape, the park features five block-long, interconnected outdoor rooms using the "landscape as infrastructure" design approach, with angular and geometric concrete structures and canals surrounded by green spaces.

Despite Riverbank Park's strong community ties, some signature areas cannot be easily preserved due to lack of safety, inaccessibility, and deterioration over time. With these constraints in mind, the project team prioritized the most culturally significant features to preserve and restore. One of the most well-known, compelling features is the park's Grand Fountain, an inverted, stepped structure that lifts water from the river to create a waterfall effect inside three open-cubed structures and over the fountain's numerous steps and transitions. The Grand Fountain is highly visible and offers visitors relief from summer heat. This feature is being preserved while proposed improvements in the area northeast of the fountain are being prioritized including overlooks, tree plantings, rain gardens, ADA-accessible ramps from street grade to the riverfront, and outcropping terraces that provide river

access. On the south banks of the river, Halprin's amphitheater and stage areas are recommended for improvement including better connectivity to the amphitheater, permeable pavement, and additional ADA-accessible terraced river access.

Although the park hasn't been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it is eligible for listing. The project team is working with the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office to draft a Memorandum of Agreement that will permit construction activities to impact the park while detailing the mitigation steps required to complete the Section 106 Historic Review process. The upland improvements are in the design and funding acquisition processes, and they will be implemented once funding has been secured.

A range of approaches and criteria are important to consider when working with historically significant landscapes. Each method can bring success within the context of varying project priorities and philosophies. Project teams must understand a site, its intended use, and why certain features were designed the way they were. Results of this research can be used to inform the desired path to tackle preservation, restoration, remediation, or reconstruction-based treatments. Community engagement and buy-in, client commitment and direction, and a common desire to improve our shared spaces are also key in determining an appropriate plan of action and ultimately the success of these efforts. •