

The Cultural Landscape Foundation
Pioneers of American Landscape Design

CORNELIA HAHN OBERLANDER

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS

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Scholar`s Choice: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander-*From Exegesis to Green Roof* by Nina Antonetti

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What do a biblical garden and a green roof have in common? The beginning of an answer is scrawled across the back of five bank deposit slips in the archives of Cornelia Hahn Oberlander at the CCA. These modest slips of paper, which contain intriguing exegesis and landscape iconography, are the raw material for a nineteen-page document Oberlander faxed to her collaborator Moshe Safdie when answering the broad programming requirements of Library Square, the Vancouver Public Library and its landscape. For the commercial space of the library, Oberlander considered the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the hanging gardens at Isola Bella, Lago Maggiore; for the plaza, the civic spaces of ancient Egypt and Greece; and for the roof, the walled, geometric gardens of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. Linking book to landscape, she illustrated the discovery of the tree of myrrh during the expedition of Hatshepsut, referenced the role of plants in Genesis and Shakespeare, and quoted a poem by environmental orator Chief Seattle. The complexity of her preliminary ideas, which span millennia and cultures, belies the simplicity and aptness of the resulting design; nevertheless the fruitful process was requisite to the rich product. Whereas her notes reveal myriad threads of art, technology, ethnobotany, and environmental justice, the spaces today are monumentally unified and expand Andrew Carnegie's vision of a centralised and free library, or "people's university," to include a series of educationally experiential, civic outdoor spaces.

Throughout her career of six decades, Oberlander begins each project with extensive research that includes visual and textual documentation of her preliminary process, at first intellectual and academic, and later driven by aesthetics, bureaucracy, and technical problems. This process reveals her dexterity as both a humanist and a practitioner. From the deposit slips to the fax, Oberlander's cryptic language and expressionistic sketches on paper torn from her cheque book become distilled into more polished concepts and ideas coherently organised into a presentable format for her collaborator. The former represents fleeting ideas on disposable paper, the latter formulated concepts for practical application.

This archival discovery is as exciting as the actual landscape because it reveals not only the complexity of Oberlander's thinking but her unadulterated intentions before inevitable compromises ensued, such as budget constraints that prevented public access to the green roof. Here we literally see Oberlander's mind at work, drawing on her liberal arts training, developing an early iteration that would answer the call for programming, proposing explicit ideas that would become implicit in a collaborative scheme, and creating a late twentieth-

century design based on our collective cultural heritage of allegorical, metaphorical, and biblical landscape traditions. This documented journey leads us right to the heart of the library.

Reflections on a Landscape Architect as Environmental Educator by Susan Ng Chung
Teacher, Vancouver, BC, Canada
March 2011

Children and youth experience designed landscapes by engaging their senses: sight, smells sounds, movement and circulation, and mood. Intentionally or not, all landscape architects are environmental educators.

This is how I first came to know Cornelia Oberlander: as an educator conducting youth through her forest landscape. I had contacted her to let her know that children were learning about sustainability through her work. To my great delight and surprise, she offered to help. There is a bit of the rebel in Cornelia that enables her to instantly connect with youth. Through her leadership and inspiration, youth thought about their future, about the landscape, and their role in shaping it.



“Do we have to go down there?” “Will it smell?” Science students were visiting the washrooms, and the thought filled them with dread. We were en route to the “bowels” of the C.K. Choi Building at the University of British Columbia (Matsuzaki Wright Architects, 1996). We were on

our way to open the bins of “humanure” from the self-composting toilets, all for education, of course! The students were fortunate to get a tour by Cornelia herself. She guided them to her gray-water trench, which absorbs rainwater from the roof, “tea” from the toilets and water from the sinks. Cornelia’s identified the irises, juncus and sedges chosen for this delicate task. When the teens opened the bins of human compost, they were surprised, “It doesn’t smell like anything!” And it looked like “black dirt”. Worms digested the waste, and the compost “tea” drained away to Cornelia’s irises. The students wandered through her sun-dappled forest under-planted with sword fern, berries, and thought of Cornelia’s lesson on: limiting footprints, storm water management and ecological design.

Under the mentorship of an architect (Stanley King), and engineer (Diana Klein), one hundred and twenty students prepared models and drawings of a sustainable school and displayed their designs to their parents and community. Students invited Cornelia as their keynote speaker:

“...With the economy shrinking, this is what we have to do. We have to communicate all these ideas of sustainable design with your generation. And (in) your generation is the great hope that you will be able to know how to proceed in this very difficult world, so I congratulate you for finding the C.K. Choi Building...”

Cornelia Oberlander, Sustainable Design Ideas Fair, April 2, 2009

How did our youth respond to Cornelia? One grade 8 boy went home and phoned his grandmother, saying that there was actually hope for his generation because they were learning to save the planet. Others emailed Cornelia to ask her how to become a landscape architect. Even the famously cynical junior high students found her irresistible.

After the ideas fair, Cornelia challenged our students to create a school garden within one year. She provided mentorship, advice and seeds. Cornelia’s outreach activities with youth reflect a conviction that landscape architects must take urgent action in addressing the ecological crisis.

When Ms. Oberlander first practiced sustainable landscape architecture, years ago, she did it alone. During the C.K. Choi landscape design, she demanded the impossible: “No trees will be removed during the construction of this building!” So they remained. Now, at the ideas fair in Vancouver, Canada, she was surrounded by like-minded youth who demanded the possible. It’s time their voices are heard.



Prince of Wales Secondary Community Garden Project :
“Focus on food and water. Create a food garden on your school grounds”.
Cornelia Oberlander



Reflections on Cornelia Oberlander by Allegra Churchill

April 2011

Cornelia is not one to dwell in the past - she is one of the most contemporary and forward - thinking landscape architects out there - but she is an important link to my own history because she knew my grandfather, Oskar Stonorov, who died before I was born.

When I graduated with my master's in landscape architecture Cornelia gave me a book he had given her, and I will always treasure this special link to them both. Cornelia and my grandfather shared a conviction that we can, and must take action to make this world a more just, more beautiful, more humane place to live in together. I am inspired by being part of their trajectory, and hope to have half of Cornelia's passion and persistence in changing the world - one plant, one place, one person at a time.

Reflections on Cornelia by Susan Cohen

April 2011



Cornelia Hahn Oberlander and I met in the spring of 1984, at a two-day Smith College alumnae event called "The Garden," at which we each gave presentations. I had recently received my landscape architecture degree and was both awed by Cornelia's accomplishments and charmed by her warmth and friendly interest.

Since that first meeting, she has become a dear friend and a generous advisor, liberal with both her encouragement and her praise. As I learned, there are scores of landscape architects who have been the beneficiaries of Cornelia's extraordinary generosity of spirit, and I have heard countless stories from others about how she affected their careers. She has helped so many of us, that to attend a professional meeting with her is to run a gauntlet of people gathering around her at every moment, wishing to express their appreciation for her help. With her boundless energy, she takes time to speak to everyone.

Over the years, Cornelia's advice to me has ranged from the personal ("Never retire!") to the practical ("Remember, it's all about grading!" or "You must do your research!") Her example proved that a woman could be dedicated to her family and still have an inspiring career. Her work inspires as well, in its imaginative power, its commitment to social responsibility and the environment, and, always, its humanity. She is a great believer in collaboration as a keynote of landscape architecture. She likes to share her watchwords, or her "survival kit," as she calls them: "patience, persistence, politeness, professionalism and passion." She puts extra emphasis on passion. Cornelia called me on 9/11, very shaken, and said, "Susan, we must continue to make the world green. Don't forget we are in a profession that makes the world better -- that is what we must continue to do."

I thank Cornelia Oberlander for her gift of friendship and for inspiring so many to follow her lead in aiming for the highest expression of our shared profession.

Reflections on Cornelia Hahn Oberlander by Cheryl Cooper
Founding Director, Arthur Erickson Conservancy
April 2011



Cornelia and me at the official reception celebrating the permanent installation of the Yosef Wosk Reflecting Pool at the Museum of Anthropology, September 19 2010. Photo by Judy Oberlander.

When I am sick, a knock on the door brings chicken soup from Cornelia, maybe Swiss lozenges or homemade applesauce or local honey, too. All year there are gifts: apples from her trees in the fall, Viennese chocolates during trying times, stollen at Christmas, flowers or branches or leaves in every season, opera and concert tickets as thanks for things done.

And I am not alone. All her friends have shared in her largesse: daisies for Arthur Erickson every summer, for instance, or books to encourage young enthusiasts. When we visited Arthur in the hospital, she brought the year's first snowdrops in tiny moss-lined pots. I saw how touched Arthur was by this simple, perfect gift. For students she always has time, no matter how busy she is, providing guidance, bibliographies, ideas, and focus, while stressing the importance of thorough research. She champions environmental awareness, the smallest and most sensitive of footprints, and the responsibility that landscapes architects, clients, and authorities must assume both to their local community and to the planet. She challenges everyone. 'We need courage,' she says, 'vision, imagination, and motivation for the 21st century.' Not to mention her boundless energy.

I remember the first time I heard Cornelia speak in public. It was a lecture for a local gardening society some years ago. But of course it was like no other lecture for a gardening society. When I heard phrases like 'this is my Stella on the ground' – I realized that I was in the company of an artist, whose canvasses were landscapes conscientiously designed and animated.

In February in Vancouver, we were standing in line waiting for Jan Gehl's lecture on urban design. She told me about her upcoming lecture for the GSD at Harvard, her alma mater. The

topic of the colloquium was “Women and Modernism in Landscape Architecture.” But Cornelia remarked: ‘I am not going to talk about that. I am going to talk about aesthetics and ecology. Susan Herrington from UBC will talk about my career.’ I laughed out loud: ‘Cornelia, that is classic. The younger people will talk about the past and you will talk about the future.’ Once a pioneer, always a pioneer!

To me, Cornelia is friend, colleague, mentor, model, advisor, adventurer, fellow advocate, and champion. We have done much together in recent years, advocating for the informed stewardship of cultural landscapes like Robson Square and the Museum of Anthropology. She continues in her dedication to these works of “enduring excellence.” Collaborating with Arthur Erickson for thirty-five years and working on more than forty projects with him, their two legacies are, as Cornelia says, “tightly intertwined.” It has been my privilege to be an advocate for their legacies, most recently to help find the support and funding for the permanent installation of the reflecting pool at the Museum of Anthropology so that Cornelia could complete her work and their original vision at last.

When Cornelia sends an email or leaves a telephone message, she characteristically signs off: “All the best, Cornelia.” It always makes me smile. For that is what she strives for in everything and for everyone, now and for the future, “all the best.”

Reflections by Phyllis Lambert

March 2011



Phyllis Lambert, Peter Oberlander and Cornelia Hahn Oberlander when the latter received an honorary degree from McGill University. Montreal, 28 May 2008. Photograph by Owen Egan. Courtesy of The Secretariat, McGill University.

Perhaps I knew Judy Oberlander, Cornelia's daughter, first. In the 1980s we both met frequently in connection with activities concerning urban conservation. And then Peter Oberlander involved me in Habitat II. *Jamais deux sans trois*, Cornelia was there and ultimately I came to know her best. In the 1980s Cornelia and I had our first dinner together in a restaurant high in the Vancouver woods. Such dinners, just the two of us, we love. As we did in our first *tête à tête*, we often talk of Cornelia's extraordinary mother (Beate Hahn), who involved her as a small child in a garden of her own, and wrote delightful books (and I think also made the lovely illustrations) to instruct children in gardening and to instill in them the love and respect of every blade of grass, "every leaf."

The landscape is ever present in Cornelia's office, which is in the extraordinary steel and glass bridge house at the edge of a ravine on the Point Grey Peninsula. Peter designed the house, (working drawings, dated June 1969, are signed by Barry Downs and Peter Oberlander, Associate Architects). Cornelia designed the landscape, or rather she created different landscapes, so that like Pliny's Laurentium Villa, there are different places for different times of day. In the morning, breakfast is taken among very tall pines, one self-seeded Yellow Cedar, rooted two stories below, as well as one very tall Douglas Fir planted from seeds Cornelia's son brought back from the university nursery. Cornelia says every tree has a story. At tea time the

trees are bathed by the setting sun, and in the distance to the north are glimpses of Burrard Bay and the Coastal Mountains, which Arthur Erickson called the Tantalus Range, and are touched all day from rising to setting sun. Cornelia's work room at the opposite end of the house, almost level with the ground, is surrounded on three sides by azaleas and rhododendrons, and the orchard and vegetable garden Cornelia planted on a higher rise of the land directly south-east for her children's and her own delight.

Set back some forty feet from the road, the house is protected from the road by a high thick Hemlock tree wall with only a small opening cut in to give access to the massed blossoms of flaming red azaleas, a mossy garden floor, ferns and periwinkles, and lily of the valley, of the entry garden. A huge, pivoting, wood door, solid in the glass wall opens to the streaming light of the double height entry hall, so that the morning visitor faces across the width of the house the glass wall of a seemingly tropical forest of the ravine, attracted by the very high azaleas glowing in the eastern sun. Cornelia planted them among the conifers.

Cornelia has become a fearless innovator in sustainability in the field of landscape architecture, for which nothing has been too small or too big in engaging her keen analysis and the creation of sustainable landscapes, which also has something to do with orientation, the slope of the land the nature of the soil. A clear, straight-talker, a dedicated unflinching persistent worker who will not let go, Cornelia is at the same time fun, funny and charming. We love to laugh together, yet we also wring our hands at the lack of care and maintenance of gardens and buildings. Cornelia is like a child celebrating when projects go well, or more certainly they go well because she never lets go, because she knows what every plant needs, and she solves the problems, such as those attendant on finally re-installing the pond at the Museum of Anthropology at University of British Columbia, which she had designed as part of the landscape in which the building is set. Cornelia was determined that it would be completed for June 14, 2010, on what would have been Arthur Erickson's 86th birthday. Cornelia's gentle but dogged persistence overcomes the bureaucracy and many needless hurdles in her way. I witnessed late night telephone calls, early morning telephone calls, early morning and late evening site meetings added to the diurnal ones, during which she explained endlessly how the waterproofing should work, made small adjustments to the shape of the pond's perimeter, and other technicalities and design issues. At the same time, Cornelia was attending to the growing medium at Robson Square where trees were being replanted (after the waterproof layer was renewed), and also had to explain why the new ill-considered installation of low plastic walls bordering planting beds recently installed, was building up heat that was killing the plants. Cornelia will continue until these thoughtless and unnecessary intrusions are removed. And there are other elements of the unity of design of this iconic architecture and landscape by Arthur and Cornelia that have been over the years constantly threatened. It is Cornelia's three

Ps, Politeness, Patience and Persistence, also applied to ski weekends with her grandchildren, that keep her centered.

On a professional level I have a privileged relationship to Cornelia, for the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal holds her archive.¹

¹ I am Founding Director and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the CCA. The CCA holds a nearly complete archive of Oberlander's projects and research, representing every period of her career from designs of the early 1950s for public spaces in Philadelphia to the major institutional projects of the 1970s that gave her international recognition. They include landscaping for the Robson Square government complex in Vancouver (1973); the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver (1976); the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (1988); the Legislative Assembly in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (1993); the Vancouver Public Library (1995); and the Canadian embassy in Washington (1989).

The archive also documents Oberlander's landscape designs for private residences, playgrounds, urban parks, and other public spaces, as well as the major projects she completed more recently, including the "green rooftop" on the Canadian embassy in Berlin (2005). The CCA's Oberlander archive includes project files and drawings, observation and research notes, site photographs, lecture notes and articles, correspondence, and other documents.

Reflections on Cornelia Hahn Oberlander by Eva Matsuzaki

Architect, First Female President of Architecture Canada (Royal Architectural Institute of Canada), wife and mother of two, and volunteer.

Vancouver, March 2011



Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's professional work has been recognized with many awards and prizes, all of them well deserved, but I would like to reflect on an aspect that has not received much attention, that of Cornelia as a role model.

In the 1960s when I began my education and career in architecture, there were few role models for women in the profession. I had no female professors/instructors, and there was one other female student in my class of 40. Early office experiences were totally male-dominated. Then in 1974 when I began working with Arthur Erickson Architects in Vancouver, I met my first and still-active role model, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, landscape architect. We were part of a large team designing the 3-block project in central Vancouver – Robson Square, The Law Courts, and the renovated Vancouver Art Gallery. Whether it was discussing design concepts over vast cardboard models or discussing details on how to lessen the weight in cantilevered planters, we began a true dialogue and a long history of collaboration on many projects – first at Arthur's office and later at Matsuzaki Wright Architects.

During our drives to site visits or during salad lunches, I would ask Cornelia how she managed to balance a robust professional career, family life, volunteer work, while staying connected to her community. She was active on all fronts. I wasn't alone asking this advice. Over the years she has encouraged so many women in architecture and landscape architecture to pursue their dreams, to stay with the passion. She taught us her mantra of 'perseverance, patience, and professionalism'. She reminded us to maintain our good humor and positive outlook. Every conversation seemed to include some laughs. In recent years we also include poetry to add flavor to the day.

Cornelia has never been too busy or reluctant to share her experiences, whether professional or personal, with women in the design professions. She has hosted Women in Architecture meetings in her house, and she has lectured at many conference workshops specifically aimed at women. There were inevitably so many questions from the floor. All were greeted with a smile and a willing answer. She has chosen to be accessible.

The older I get, the more I appreciate those who have walked the path ahead of me. Now we walk the path together, as friends, usually along the beach at Spanish Banks.

Cornelia Hahn Oberlander-An Experience to Remember by Gino Pin, FRAIC

Yellowknife, NT

March 2011

Canada's mid north Canadian Shield country with its immensity of lakes, bogs, and protruding Precambrian rock is beautiful beyond belief. For an architect to interrupt this beauty with structures is both a difficult and a humbling experience.

In 1991 we were involved in the design of a new legislative building for the Northwest Territories in Yellowknife. We wanted a landscape architect on the design team who would appreciate and respond sensitively to the beauty and rugged nature of the site landscape (rock outcrop, water and precious vegetation). Cornelia was suggested as the person who would best respond to the need for minimal natural disturbance. Cornelia's sensitivity to this natural site resulted in a solution in which the building appears to have been gently lowered into its natural setting – undisturbed; ultimately simplistic yet complex in research, understanding, thought and determination; a true expression of Cornelia's philosophy of "least intervention"

Reflections on Cornelia Oberlander by Sandy Rotman

Toronto, Ontario

March 2011

In January of 1992 I contacted Cornelia Oberlander to ask if she would consider designing our large city garden. She was so happy to receive my call. In her charming way, she said that she did not design gardens. After much persuasion, she said she would come to Toronto to see the site.

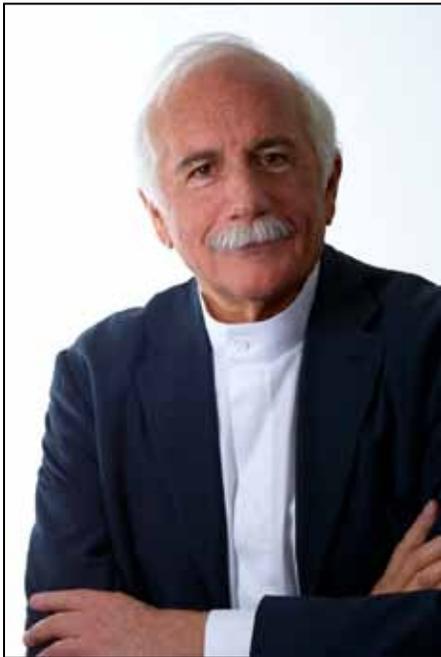
Cornelia came to our home a few weeks later. This was the beginning of a wonderful friendship between the Oberlanders and the Rotmans.

Cornelia taught us about strength, structure and ecology. She does her part to heal the earth. Her public spaces are a gift to Canada.

Our garden is a special peaceful, architectural space.

Working with Cornelia Oberlander by Moshe Safdie

April 2011



I first met Cornelia in Vancouver while coming to give a lecture during the construction of Expo 67; it was in Arthur Erickson's garden. I was instantly impressed by her passion and enthusiasm.

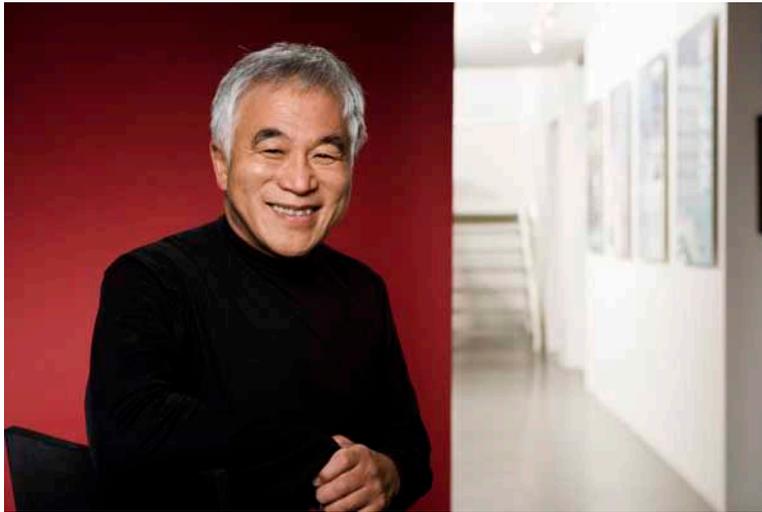
Many years passed before my first post-Habitat Canadian commission. The National Gallery of Canada offered the opportunity for collaboration with Cornelia. This was followed by the Ottawa City Hall and the Vancouver Public Library, each of which resulted in a unique landscape, particular to the place and to the occasion as well as the program.

Cornelia's contribution to these projects has been pivotal, as it has been to the projects in which she collaborated with others. As the years go by the landscapes mature and the patina of life imprints the projects, Cornelia always remains engaged, tending to her plants and keeping an eye on their well-being.

Above all, Cornelia is an extraordinary and loyal friend. This is a friendship that has grown to one between families, crossing great distances of time and space.

Reflections on Cornelia Hahn Oberlander by Bing Thom, CM, MAIBC, FRAIC, AIA

March, 2011



I first met Cornelia while interviewing landscape architects for Arthur Erickson's Law Courts project in Vancouver. At the time, Cornelia was busy raising a young family and largely practicing as a landscape architect for children's playgrounds. Cornelia was infectious from the first meeting. Boundless energy and enthusiasm! The Law Court was one of the first green roof projects in North America but Cornelia was undaunted. She threw herself into the challenge and researched diligently on native plants, irrigations and most importantly, grading. In the intervening years, Cornelia has single-handedly become the guardian of what is now the Robson Square and Courthouse project in Vancouver (recently the recipient of the Prix du XXe Siècle from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada). Cornelia's career has matured and blossomed to many countries and continents but she has not lost that early enthusiasm and energy in all things new and challenging.

Most of all, she is grounded by common sense and dedication to using landscape elements to heal the earth. She is first and foremost a gardener and has never lost touch with our natural habitat. She is also the only octogenarian I know that can out-walk and out-think any 30 year old!

Whenever I am depressed or feeling unsure, I phone Cornelia for an instant pick me up! It is a pleasure and inspiration to walk the same path with her.

Reflections on Cornelia Hahn Oberlander by Shavaun Towers FASLA

March 2011



Cornelia is enchanting, endearing, and always inspiring...she also knows her stuff, does her research, and works tirelessly....or so I found in 1995-96 collaborating with her on the Landscape Master Plan for Smith College, our shared Alma Mater, albeit 27 years apart. I called her "Our Environmental Conscience" and she seemed to sit on my shoulder throughout the project... and has ever since, in fact.

She liked to quote Thomas Mendenhall, President of Smith during both my tenure and her daughter's, as urging us all to go forth with "Patience, Politeness, and Perseverance" to which she added "Passion". It could be her motto. It is amazing what a large presence such a small figure can project by force of will and conviction. Her commitment to environmental (and social) sustainability informs not only all of her design decisions, but also her interactions with students, professionals, and those with the administrative power to affect the change she seeks.

While her design sensibility and attention to the natural essence of the landscape always create a sense of specific place, perhaps more importantly, they awaken a pride of place. Whatever Cornelia does, she adds a special aura to any landscapes she touches, whether it is a campus, an urban rooftop, a museum or a playground...perhaps because of the depth of the devotion and the intensity of the dedication she brings to the process.

As long as I've known her, Cornelia has always been ahead of the curve...more concerned with sustainability, roofdeck development, soil quality, plant sourcing from local genomes, etc., etc., long before most of the rest of the profession; and I know her concern for children's opportunities for the exploration of nature dates to her own childhood.

Fortunately, she has never forgotten the seriousness of play in her own life; it's always a treat, if sometimes exhausting, to play along with her.

Reflections on Cornelia Hahn Oberlander by Hank White

HM White Site Architects, New York, NY

March 2011



There are some people who miraculously become an important part of your life where their serendipitous entry is a source of huge wonder as one cannot imagine life without them. Cornelia is one such person as she quickly became my adopted aunt. I met Cornelia through a Harvard GSD classmate who as a contemporary of mine was a Smith College graduate. She had come to know Cornelia through their common path as “Smithie” liberal arts undergraduates. They were among a fellowship of Smith women to take on the rigors of landscape architectural graduate work. In her well bred German charm, we immediately hit it off and found many similar life passions. From a relatively brief encounter, it was decided that we must somehow work together.

Since Cornelia considers Vancouver, BC a suburb to New York City, she never hesitates to consider collaborations on New York City projects. It did not take too long before we found ourselves as project partners in designing the lobby courtyard and roof gardens for Renzo Piano’s design for the New York Times Building in Times Square. We were quite a pair when presented before a most diverse and discerning client group as no one was prepared for such an authoritative voice to emerge from Cornelia’s perfectly dressed and somewhat diminutive figure. Dan Kaplan, a Senior Principal-in-Charge for the project’s executive architects - FX Fowle, said proudly to us, “You out Renzoed Renzo,” following the close of the courtyard’s final design presentation. It was Cornelia’s articulated sensitivity and the orchestration of the presentation that included live plant samples of the garden’s groundcover plantings that earned us such

stellar recognition. Cornelia's wisdom in how to appeal to people's universal sensibilities was in full force.

What is so engaging about being in Cornelia's sphere is her relentless energy level which is fueled by her passion to create great landscape art while embodying the integrity of the highest ecological principles. When my wife had the pleasure of meeting Cornelia for the first time, her immediate response was, "I want to be her when I grow up." Her vitality and the zest with which she lives each day is truly an inspiration for anyone who comes within an ear shot of her. Her daily agenda would exhaust most twenty year olds. As a somewhat doubting Thomas, I had to see for myself Cornelia's prowess on the ski slopes. As a person who rarely if ever disappoints, Cornelia easily kept pace with me during a most memorable ski excursion when I was a guest at her family's ski home in Whistler/Blackcombe, B.C.. I can only hope and pray that I will be fortunate enough to be swooshing the slopes like her at her age.

For over 15 years, my devoted friendship with Cornelia remains an inspirational force and exemplifies why the concept of retirement is an outdated life model. She continues to contribute to her memoirs with each new day championing innovative solutions that brings the world closer to understanding the fundamentals of its environmental operations and the cultural history we have layered onto them.



Reflections on Cornelia Oberlander by Elisabeth Whitelaw

March 2011



In my final year of Landscape Architecture at UBC Cornelia Oberlander came to give a talk on modernism. As with so many students past and present, I was captivated by her vitality and enthusiasm. Later in that same year Cornelia hosted a CSLA soiree in her home where I was warmly greeted by Cornelia and her charming husband Peter. Little did I know at the time that for more than twenty years I would be coming every day to the studio in the beautiful home overlooking a ravine.

Working in a 'home' studio is a very personal experience, especially over many years. As I let myself in the front door each morning I am greeted with the smells of toast and coffee, and before Peter's passing in 2008, the discussions that were taking place at the kitchen table. This was Cornelia and Peter's special time to confer before Peter dashed off to his office. On our front, we would begin with a plan of the activities for the day: concept sketches, sections, plans, correspondence, meetings and site visits.

The studio is at one end of a linear modernist house. A drawing table sits on an oriental carpet in a space that encompasses both a ravine and a courtyard garden by way of two glass walls. There is an extensive slide collection and a wonderful library of books and journals dating back more than a half a century.

In 1987 when I started working for Cornelia it was pre-computer, pre-fax. The typewriter with Helvetica typeface was a little manual machine housed in its own special suitcase. Now technology has transformed the home office with flexible connections to the world, while retaining the advantages of a focused and controlled physical space.

Cornelia has kept true to the principles of design that she learned so long ago at the Harvard GSD. With each new project the approach to design is very prescribed with its origins in 'basic design'. Innovation comes with staying abreast of new technology and adapting the new ideas to find solutions in her own work. Over the years Cornelia has directed me in some wonderful research on grassland plants, a new technology for tree planting in trenches and once a planting of successive blooming tulips. Each project is a new beginning, built slowly as the research progresses. I quickly realized that you don't need to know everything, you just need to know who to ask. One of our steepest learning curves was with the C.K. Choi Building at UBC. With women architects and engineers we were determined to make the greenest building possible in 1995. Soon Cornelia was connecting with a former NASA scientist located in Picayune, Mississippi about recycling waste water which led to a greywater trench to clean the 'tea' from the composting toilets and collected rainwater. Before starting the first project in the Canadian arctic Cornelia found a man who had spent his career studying peat bogs and she knew the questions she wanted to ask.

With the ups and downs in a busy office, one of Cornelia's most endearing qualities is her ability to step back out of the tension. Moments after a crushing blow to a project; a reduction in the budget or a postponement that changes the whole office schedule, I can hear her peal of laughter ring through the house when she completely leaves the crisis for a minute and shares a lighter topic on the phone with a colleague.

Accolades have been part of Cornelia's career from the beginning but these days they seem to roll in with the weather. Happily it appears that all the world is recognizing Cornelia's hard work and brilliant ideas, which she accepts with grace and dignity. It has been a pleasure and an honour to learn from and collaborate with such a magnificent woman and friend.