

The Cultural Landscape Foundation

Pioneers of American Landscape Design

ROBERT ROSTON

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS

Cordelia Hill

Manuela King

Harold Kobayashi

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Julia Machotka

Doug Nelson

Tito Patri

Reflections on Robert Royston by Cordelia Hill

January 2020

Bob Royston was an extraordinary designer, artist, and mentor. I had the pleasure of working with Bob for more than twenty years, from the beginning of my career until his retirement from the firm. He approached design with a passion for exploring relationships of spaces, uses, and forms. During my first year of working with Bob, he gave a workshop to all the new staff on these principles, using simple models to demonstrate tension and interest in design. He continued to share his insights with me on the multiple projects that we worked on- pushing me to look at the nuances of texture and color in the design as well as overall patterns.

In addition to mentoring the design skills of his staff, Bob also promoted the social interface of the firm. He shared his beloved Hat Creek property in Northern California for company camping trips and invited the firm to his lovely Mill Valley home for delicious meals and Pétanque tournaments.

I feel lucky to have known this extraordinary man.

Reflections on Robert Royston by Manuela King

January 2020

Bob Royston had a profound influence on the many landscape architects that worked for him. I came to Royston, Hanamoto, Alley & Abey straight from graduate school. Bob took me under his wing and nurtured me as a designer and as a person. His view toward the big vision, seeing through the clutter of the details, has influenced me on all my projects. He had a twinkle in his eye and always a smile when we worked together. I will never forget some of the projects we worked on together – Opus One Winery and the National Peace Garden being two of the most memorable to me. He was a great man, and I feel blessed to have been close to him as my mentor and friend.

Reflections on Robert Royston by Harold Kobayashi

December 2019

I first met Robert when I was a senior at U.C. Berkeley, in 1959. He was the visiting lecturer for the design studio, but the introduction was brief since I had little contact with him. Six years later, I became an employee in his firm in San Francisco.

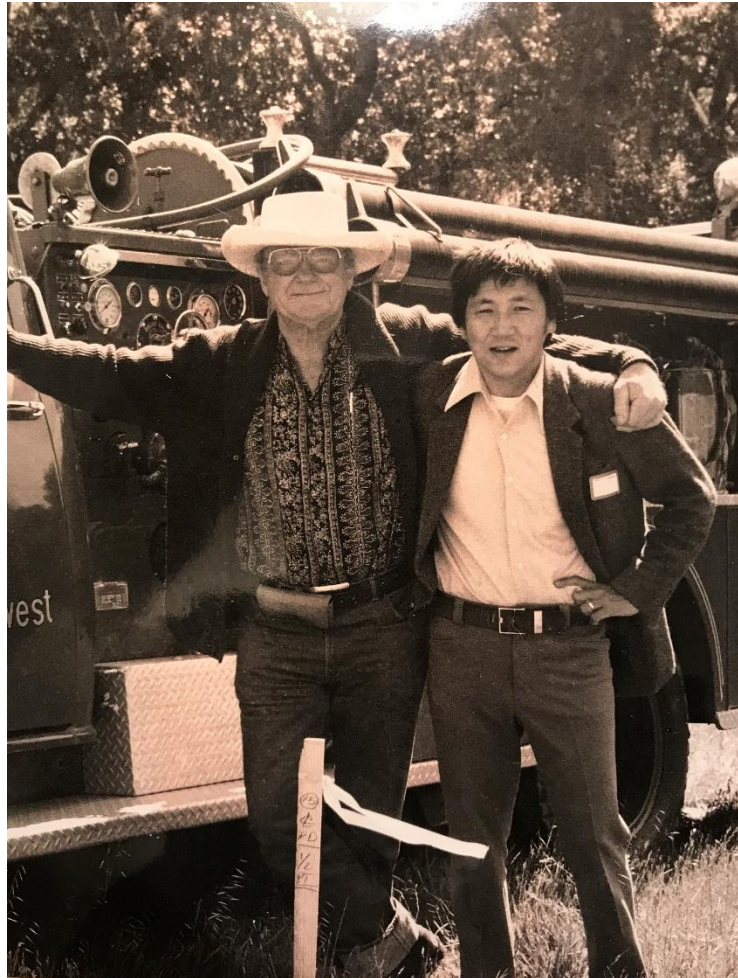
Robert Royston was a “One of a Kind” landscape architect to the profession. From 1958 until his retirement in 1995, we at Royston, Hanamoto Alley & Abey valued his mentorship of the staff and partners. Robert expected staff to be fully engaged with a project, and their participation was important and critical to the final design solution. During the firm’s existence, past staff members have commented on Robert being their mentor.

The firm’s partners, Robert Royston, Asa Hanamoto, Louis Alley, Kaz Abey, Patricia Carlisle, and Harold Kobayashi, collaborated for approximately 40 years. Robert Royston created the firm with the talented partners and, most important, selected partners that had the same degree of moral integrity.

We, the partners, held Robert as the “Master of the Profession,” but he understood that the other partners coordinated the running of the firm.

My relationship with Bob, as I called him, started as a staff member, progressed to an associate, and in 1978 I became a partner. He was my mentor. This is an example of the typical process I had with Bob on a new project: Bob and I would meet a new client at the site and discuss the project objectives, opportunities, and constraints. On the way back to the office, we would stop for lunch, and during our lunch he would “doodle” a sketch on a napkin or scrap of paper. Back in the office, I would interpret his sketch into a scaled schematic plan from which we would have a review session with the design team to develop several alternative options to the plan. During this process, Bob had a clear direction of the design intent.

Bob enjoyed using a fat lead holder with a soft black graphite lead to sketch. That was his “baton.” He would use the baton to adjust and work over a plan with the staff. It usually caused anxiety to the staff after working on the concept for many hours and to see it sketched away. This lead pencil eventually became a hot item with me to have and use, as I entered my partnering days.



To me, Bob was a “gentle giant.” He was big in stature and personality, always with a smile and mild voice. I never ever saw him in a dark mood or heard him speak in a loud, defiant voice. I have been with Bob in meetings with notable architects, and they admired his design philosophy and personality. Bob had that unique personality, which I will always remember.



There were other adventures that did not involve work. Every year Bob invited the Principals and Associates of the firm to his property at Hat Creek in Northern California for the opening day of fishing season. Asa Hanamoto and Kaz Abey taught me how to fish. We fished all day and partied all night eating, drinking and playing poker. I remember Bob Odermatt of ROMA and George Matsumoto, an architect and good friend of Bob's, as being some of the other invited guests. The guys smoked cigars and carried on a constant banter of exaggerated stories and tried to bluff each other. The opening of fishing season was always a gregarious weekend.

Bob was my mentor and a role model. I learned about landscape architecture from him and about living an exuberant life. He inspired us all with his passion for landscape architecture and lust for life.

Reflections on Robert Royston by Julia Machotka

January 2020

Mr. Royston, Robert, Bob...whatever name you addressed him by (and it was likely the latter, he was very informal), this man gave you a piece of himself that was real, caring, uninhibited and unfiltered. It was also a unique bond between the two of you.

I had my own unique bond with Robert (I called him Robert, thanks to my mom who preferred not shortening anyone's names) and it was one of the most cherished of my lifetimes. He lifted me up, he listened, he encouraged me and he conversed with me about anything and everything. The most spontaneous of topics made for some of the best of our chats.

Robert Royston was my stepfather and he was a mentor and rock in my life for the 30 years we were thrown together as a modern family. I often tell people that he loved me more than both my mother and father combined. In a way, that's completely accurate, but (to be fair to parents who loved me deeply) the difference was that Robert had limitless love, affection, time, patience and understanding...for everyone, not just me. He gave me every bit of himself, and he did that with everyone.

In the last year of his life, at a time he was recovering from hip surgery at the hospital, I was at his bedside (as were half a dozen people at a time). Many of us were gathered at his side at all times during the weeks he was there. It wasn't long before the hospital staff told us that they had never seen a patient receive so many visitors! And when no one was there but the staff (a very rare occurrence), he'd tell them jokes and stories and let them each have their own Robert that they'd share with us the next day. They were simply touched by the close friendship they had just formed, in a matter of moments and under challenging circumstances. He was simply always wanting to open up his world and to open anyone else's world.

He gave himself to everyone at all times. He wanted to hear what each person had to say and was genuinely interested in growing from what others could tell him. He genuinely enjoyed what anyone would propose and banter about. It didn't matter that he may have had more to give to a conversation than I did, he simply loved being a part of the dialogue and let you give what you had to give.

For all his professional accomplishments, I feel like his personal ones far exceeded them.

Reflections on Robert Royston by Doug Nelson

December 2019

When I started at Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey in 1987, Bob Royston was still very much a fixture in the office, but by that time he had turned over operation of the office to his partners. Free of the burdens of running the office, Bob could focus his time on project design, teaching, and travel. He took an interest in the young people in the office and often stopped by to chat. He was always cheerful and had a soft smile. Bob did not possess the large ego of some of his contemporaries. He was always down to earth and at home around people. He particularly loved interacting with students. He made annual trips to several design schools and hosted traveling classes at the office. There is a small army of landscape architects around the world that have been influenced by him.

If you had a design issue for Bob to weigh in on, he would pull out a roll of yellow trace and his design tool of preference, a very fat Koh-I-Noor 5.6 mm lead holder. The over-sized pencil looked perfectly normal in his very large hands and fingers. He would sketch with the large pencil with large sweeping motions that always captured the big picture of his design thoughts. His design ideas flowed freely, and when he was done, I would often wonder why I hadn't thought of that.

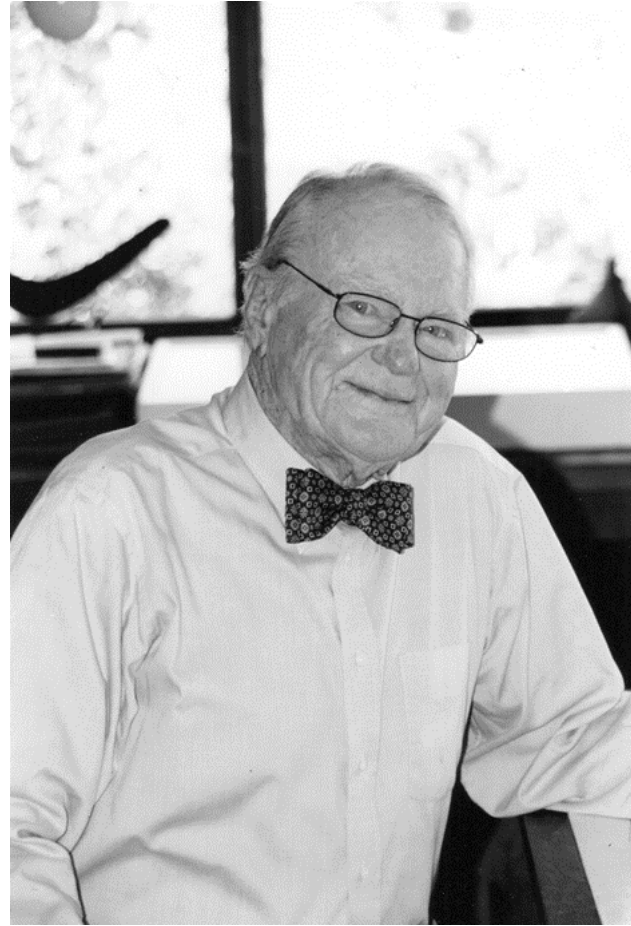
There was a visible slowing in the last decade of his life, but his lifelong interest in design kept him active and interested to the end. His visits to the office became small events during that time, but he always brought with him a good word and that soft smile.



Reflections on Robert Royston by Tito Patri

December 2019

Robert Royston or Bob as we all called him, was a big guy with a robust personality and a welcoming smile. He was accessible and interested in engaging the upcoming generation of aspiring landscape architects. I know this because as a friend of the family while I was still in high school, he told me about landscape architecture well before he employed me. Meeting him in the late forties was not unusual as he was a part of the relatively small Bay Area community of liberal artists which included my parents, an artist illustrator and hand bookbinder. In 1954 I was still in my last undergraduate year at Berkeley when he and his partners Garrett Eckbo and Ed Williams decided to take me under their trusting wings. Perhaps he was sympathetic to the insecurities of a neophyte entering the drafting rooms of one of the most prestigious landscape architectural firms in California because he was, at the outbreak of the Second World War, as was the case with many of his contemporaries, drafted into the military shortly after his graduate studies or even perhaps before their completion. I believe Bob served as a lieutenant in the U.S Navy. Yet in his dealings with partners, staff and, to the best of my knowledge with clients, he was anything but militaristic. Rather in the case of presentation of design proposals to clients Bob seemed to me to assume the role of a kind teacher and without a trace of condescension explaining how the principles of design, (space, line, color and texture, etc.) would be artfully blended into a beautiful remaking of the subject site to fit the client's program...and hopefully budget.



It is important to remember many of the schools of landscape design prior to WWII still espoused Beaux Art principles which emphasized control of nature often expressed in formal symmetrical layouts. Even the department in progressive Berkeley was called "Ornamental Horticulture" - essentially the art of organizing lawns and non-native plant material as "ornamentation" around and between buildings. So Bob and his contemporaries, even those emerging from the Beaux Art schools, were pioneering in grasping the principles of the Bauhaus School for which true beauty meant reflection of essential function, simplicity, honesty of materials and blending of the arts, especially relevant for architects and landscape architects. Note the words and concepts of "ecology" and "environmental management" had not yet entered our vocabulary in any meaningful way. That was to happen some twenty years later, changing the paradigm for landscape architecture. It must be said that the embracing of those "modern" principles was not always well received. Comparisons have been made between a particular abstract painting by Vassily Kandinsky from the 1940's with a park layout by Bob's firm, Eckbo, Royston and Williams. The similarities noticed by some UCB professors already in the late 1950's were remarkable suggesting that rather than application of the Bauhaus principles it's style was simply being copied by landscape architects in the form of a site plan.

Bob's most notable work was in the conceptualization and design of large-scale public parks. In the post war boom years even as orchards in the Santa Clara Valley south of San Francisco were being gobbled up by single family home subdivisions, some jurisdictions managed to preserve generous open space areas for community parks. These were perfect canvases for Bob's style. Vast swaths of irrigated lawn were defined by curving rows of evenly spaced trees and by gently rolling mounds which defined "places" for specific uses such as picnicking and age specific play areas. The curving concrete "freeways", bridges and tunnels for pedal powered toy-scale wagons and cars are famous. His design skills bridged large scale spatial organization to the details of constructed elements such as wind screens, arbors and trellises. To me these illustrated the skill of this paradoxically robust "big guy" for the design of finely detailed beautifully proportioned structures often making use of small evenly spaced redwood boards creating translucent effects.

Once as we were driving south of San Jose to a presentation of a design, Bob pointed through the flat ground plane of neat rows of orchard trees to a small white stucco farmhouse surrounded by a tight cluster of out buildings, all nestled at the foot of rolling grass blanketed hills. "That's where I grew up", he said. Thinking back after these 65 plus years it occurs to me that the designs of this sweet, gentle man were a natural outgrowth of that quiet well-ordered managed farm landscape.