

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center [Landscape as Mentor]

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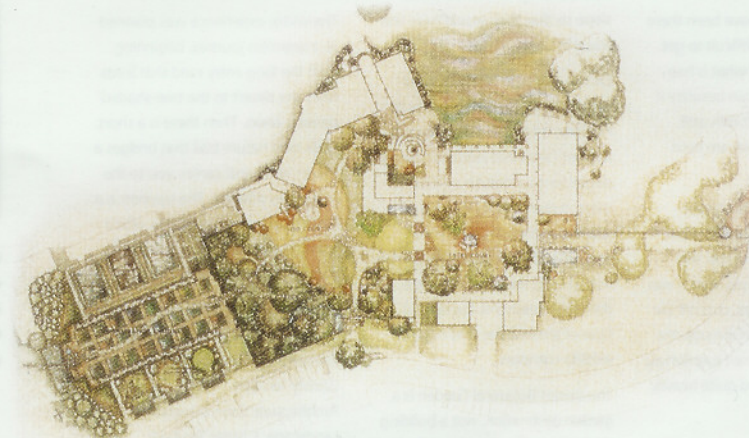
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View from entrance walkway;  
entrance walk; wildflower center  
site with native grasses and oaks;  
site plan

Photos: Darrel Morrison  
Graphic: Darrel Morrison, Eleanor  
McKinney, Bob Anderson

Landscape Architect: Darrel Morrison  
Eleanor McKinney, Bob Anderson  
Architect: Overland Partners  
(Rick Archer, Bob Shemwell)



## Darrel Morrison Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

I have a bad case of topophilia, Yi-Fu Tuan's term for "love of place." I fall in love with places, with landscapes, perhaps too easily. This can be a curse, but as a landscape architect who hopes that his work will help people appreciate their natural landscapes, maybe I should regard this affliction as a blessing.

One place that I really love is the Texas Hill Country. Though I first experienced this landscape several decades ago when I was in the army at Fort Hood, I had my first real exposure to it when I began to visit, not long ago, the place that would become the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. The general image of the Hill Country, of course, is of the patterns of wildflowers, which are fantastic when they are in bloom. But a harsher type of beauty is evidenced during the hot and dry times, a beauty that has some wonderful subtleties.

In *This Favored Place, The Texas Hill Country*, Elroy Bode recalled growing up in the Hill Country savanna landscape: *Pastures, to go into them as a boy into the grass, the scattered flint and limestone rocks, the shadows, the bare clearings, the green thickets, was to enter a beautiful clarity, a great sense of what was pure and real. I would walk through tall needle grass, stumbling now and then over half-buried rocks, and when I rested in the shade of a live oak, it always seemed that each limb was hugely intimate, like a thought, and the tree itself like a family.*<sup>1</sup>

There are also cultural overlays in the landscape. In the book, *Coming to Terms, The German Hill Country of Texas*, Lawrence Goodwyn wrote about the settlement of the Hill Country: *Thin soil, sparse trees, a landscape strewn with rocks. They began with the rocks. With the rocks, they built houses, barns and fences. All that was asked of them was their labor. And lots of labor indeed, for in addition to farms, houses, barns and fences, they built school-houses, beautifully adapting the natural materials in a native landscape.*<sup>2</sup>

I spent my first night at the site camping to get the feel of the place. Over the next few weeks, I looked for those key elements that should be saved because they were symbolic of the Hill Country. I also looked for the best place to put the building complex so that it would do the least damage and have the best views.

We did not begin with a pristine site. It had been ranched and overgrazed, and it had not burned, which is a natural phenomenon that would have kept the land more open and savanna-like. Yet there many important natural elements remained, like 663 trees that were six inches in diameter or greater. (One key element of the landscape was a cluster of three trees on the horizon.) The live oak forms and the warmth and texture of the grasses were elements that I did not want to lose. We also looked for microhabitats in order to find vegetation that belonged here so that we could put things back together again after construction.

The architects were sympathetic to letting the landscape influence the design of the buildings, for example, by focusing on views of specific trees through certain windows. In fact, it seems to me the architects were willing to the landscape win out in the end, and nature is taking over the architecture. There is a memorable view from the entrance walk into an area that was bare earth before the project and then was planted. Somebody once asked if we had designed this view. I would have liked to have said yes, we consciously did, but what we really did was to design the opportunity for this view to occur. The architects deserve a lot of credit for creating these frames, which feature the landscape so nicely.

### Notes

1. Elroy Bode, *This Favored Place, The Texas Hill Country* (Bryan, Tex.: Shearer Publications, 1983)
2. Lawrence Goodwyn, in Frederick C. Baldwin and Wendy Watriss, *Coming to Terms: The German Hill Country of Texas* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1991)