

## A New Gilded Age: From Gilded Landscapes to Ecological Guilds

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**This project explores how to respond to historically significant landscapes in the face of dramatic and overwhelming environmental changes like sea level rise. The rules that govern the design of landscapes in the past are placed against the current and future conditions in order to understand the need to expand historical interpretations and accommodate ecological variables. An important Gilded era garden in Rhode Island is used to investigate and apply real world concepts, regulations and related variables that would arise in a typical investigation. The conclusions reveals the design opportunities afforded by the chaos generated through sea level rise and how this could work towards integrating ecological communities.**

The Gilded Age foreshadowed two kinds contemporary landscapes that are ecologically problematic. The first are the productive but contaminated industrial sites, like mining, that fueled the rapid expansion of industrialization. The second are the consumer-based leisure estates owned by beneficiaries of industrialization and transportation, of which many are now challenged by climate change and sea level rise. The former offers clear ecological responses, such as to remediate or remove pollutants, but the latter - the playscapes for the privileged - present more complicated ecological responses due to their cultural heritage.[1]

The following uses a real world site to reflect on the complexities above. The project is a redesign for the water's edge at Blithewold Gardens and Estate, a prominent residence created during the height of the Gilded Age in Bristol, Rhode Island that is now open to the public. One of its most important assets is its expansive lawn that seamlessly touches the Narragansett bay when viewed from the mansion's patio. Yet, the potential erosion of this piece de resistance by sea level rise and ecological succession are indicative of larger climate change issues that threaten the preservation of these places all over New England. How does a designer preserve heritage while including more ecological processes?

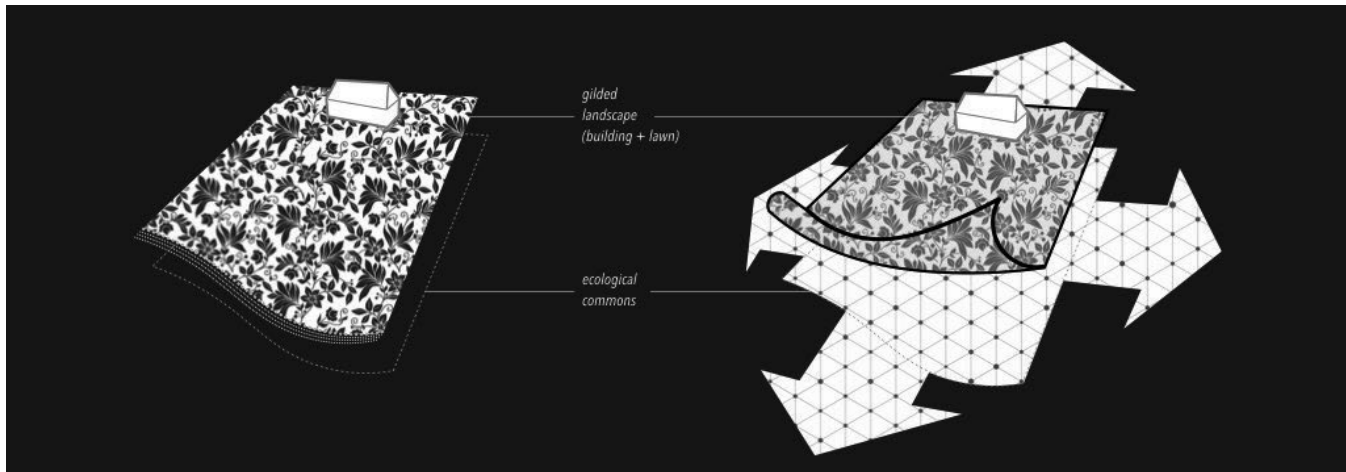
Blithewold's landscapes were originally a summer respite for the owners who sought refuge in gardening and hunting. The name Blithewold means "happy woodland" in old English which eludes to the created wilderness that was shaped and cultivated over many years by the original owners. It was the collection of plants from all over the world and leisurely walkways that would define an idyllic adult playground for socializing and quiet gazes. Yet the vision of ecology and

nature fostered by these turn of the century caretakers were focused on appearances that extended the interior wealth of the mansion. The exotic vegetations, engineered revetment and picturesque gardens were the aesthetic layers that we now know were suppressing more fundamental ecological values in the landscape.

The landscape today sustains many of these pattern as part of preservation. It continues as a place of leisure, but the is major difference now is that it is open for the public to enjoy. However as we look toward the future with sea level rise (SLR), it is becoming increasingly evident that the water's edge will slowly erode and change the vegetal composition.[2] This leads to either to the preservation of form/location or to reinterpret preservation to accommodate SLR change. Since SLR will in short time overwhelm any formal creations, we are left with accepting the significant alternation to the landscape as part of a new rupture in the landscape. Leisure has been a key narrative that could bring consistency in shaping its future, but the rift loosens an opportunity to reinterpret a more inclusive, nonhuman, interpretation of leisure and play and to allow the natural dialog between land and sea.

The primary rules that govern the water's edge are set forth by two opposing entities. The first is the coastal commission of Rhode Island (CRMC) which regulates in general 200 feet inland from any coastal features. The second set of boundaries comes from the client (Blithewold) which shares a strong desire to maintain historical continuity to engage the water's edge and to enrich the site with more programmatic uses. The conflict arises from regulations requiring protection of coastal edges from humans and another with the insistence to include more activities. In addition each kind of requirement is not suggestive of comparable problems. For example, coastal regulations do not consider programmatic needs in their ecological evaluations and the client is not incentivized to retract any land or revetment that has been grandfathered into the system. However, it is in this dissonance that both parties understand there is room for play and negotiation.

What lies beneath the thinning gild created by SLR is the opportunity to better understand the underlying forms that will likely dominate this landscape. Water is the disturbance that will inevitably overcome the revetment and change the ecology of the shoreline from a simple to a more complex network of ecological activities. A categorical term used by ecologist to describe these more complex biological



communities are called “ecological guilds.” Guilds are defined as “a group of species that exploit the same class of environmental resources in a similar way.”[3] Depending on factors such as topography, soil and vegetation, there is a possibility of generating a diverse set of habitat types that are commonly observed in other parts of the state.

Rhode Island has a state wide ecological agenda through the Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) which seeks to promote the ecological health of the state.[4] They utilize, among many conservation tools, the guild communities to define general landscape typologies. These are used to identify and conserve existing habitats with higher conservation value, but are not necessarily put forth with an aim to create new ones. Due to this conservation emphasis, it also is less instructive about integrating a positive human relationship with non-human interactions. An effort to intermix communities such as plants, invertebrate and avian species with humans remains a more holistic ecological design opportunity.

Grand historical and leisure landscapes may seem irrelevant to contemporary ecological concerns, but they embody the prototypical ideals that are embedded in everyday cultural landscapes, which in aggregation are also part of today’s ecological problems. These landscapes and residences from the Gilded Age do not hide behind a pragmatism of “shelter” or related necessities, but exaggerate the displays of what today’s residences are aesthetically - consumptive and leisurely vessels.[5] Addressing basic ecological issues (stormwater, vegetation) are increasingly becoming important topics in large scale design, yet they evade broader application to the everyday landscapes.[6] Ecological guilds at places like Blithewold are largely invisible or simplified because they are overcome by historical forces that make them admirable and relatable places, but as the threat and effects of SLR on future landscape become accepted, there are great design opportunities to rethink, reinterpret and reimagine a more complex kind preservation that may result in a new Guided Age.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Nassauer, Joan Iverson. “Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology.” Island Press, (1997).
2. Parris, Adam S., Peter Bromirski, Virginia Burkett, Daniel R. Cayan, Mary Evans Culver, John Hall, Radley M. Horton et al. “Global Sea Level Rise Scenarios for The United States National Climate Assessment.” (2012). Heffner, Leanna, Rebecca Williams, Graduate School of Oceanography, URI, Virginia Lee, Pam Rubinoff, Carissa Lord, URI Coastal Resources Center. “Climate Change and Rhode Island’s Coasts: Past, Present, and Future.” (2012)
3. Simberloff, Daniel, and Tamar Dayan. “The guild concept and the structure of ecological communities.” *Annual review of ecology and systematics* 22, no. 1 (1991): 115-143.
4. Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. “Community Wildlife Conservation Guide: Implementing Rhode Island’s Wildlife Action Plan in Your Community.” (2015).
5. Nassauer focuses on the “aesthetics of care” as a way for people to express their social meaning through landscapes, including stewardship, work ethic, pride and contribution. Nassauer, Joan Iverson. “Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology.” Island Press, (1997). p 68.
6. Jenkins, Virginia. *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession*. Smithsonian Institution, 2015.