Adaptive Reuse as Storytelling: Reviving the Spirit of Place

Utah Historic Preservation Conference
Shalae Larsen, PLA, ASLA
Io LandArch



Ogden Union Stockyards; Ogden, UT

About Io LandArch

We weave culture, nature, and place.

Areas of practice:

- Historic Preservation
- Community Revitalization
- Recreation & Trails
- Ecological Landscapes
- Creative Placemaking

Key Idea:

- Every place has a story worth telling.



Landscapes as Stories

Historic places are more than physical artifacts.

Landscapes tell stories through:

- Ecology
- Human use
- Memory
- Time

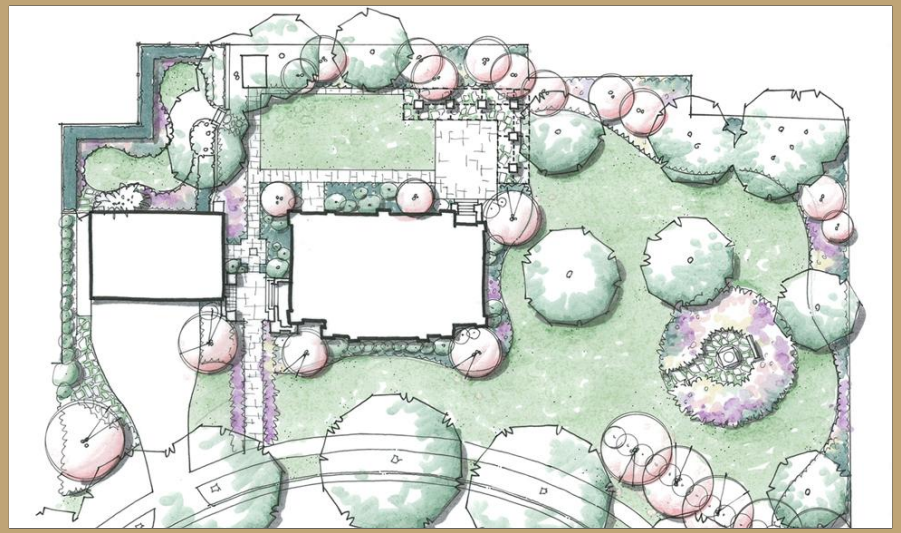
Landscapes are stories written across land.



Stilwell Fields HALS & Section 106;
Salt Lake City, UT

Historic Buildings vs. Historic Landscapes





Historic Buildings:

- Primarily physical fabric
- More static
- Defined by structures

Historic Landscapes:

- Living systems
- Dynamic and evolving
- Defined by relationships

Historic Landscapes Exist in Four Dimensions

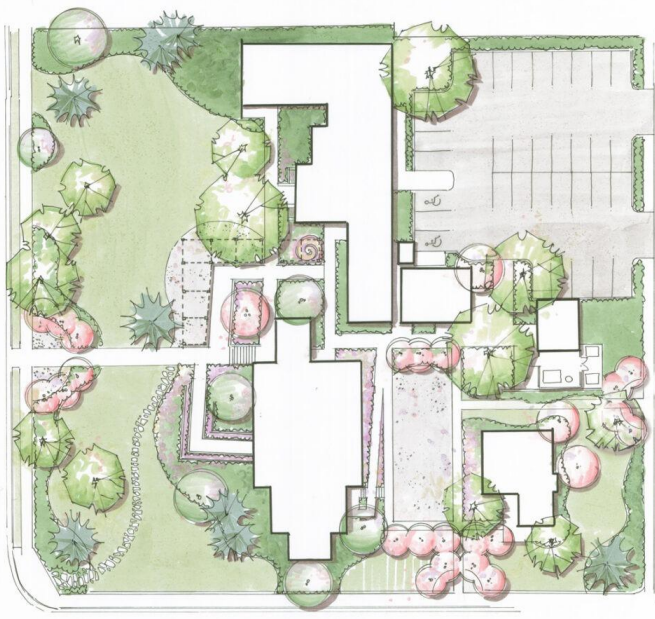
The four dimensions of historic landscapes:

- Space
- Time
- Ecology
- Human Experience

Key Idea:

Historic landscapes are always changing.





Reading a Historic Landscape

- Layers of Meaning
- Historic Landscape

Examples:

- Ecological systems
- Historic patterns
- Community narratives
- Physical remnants



Washington Fields HALS

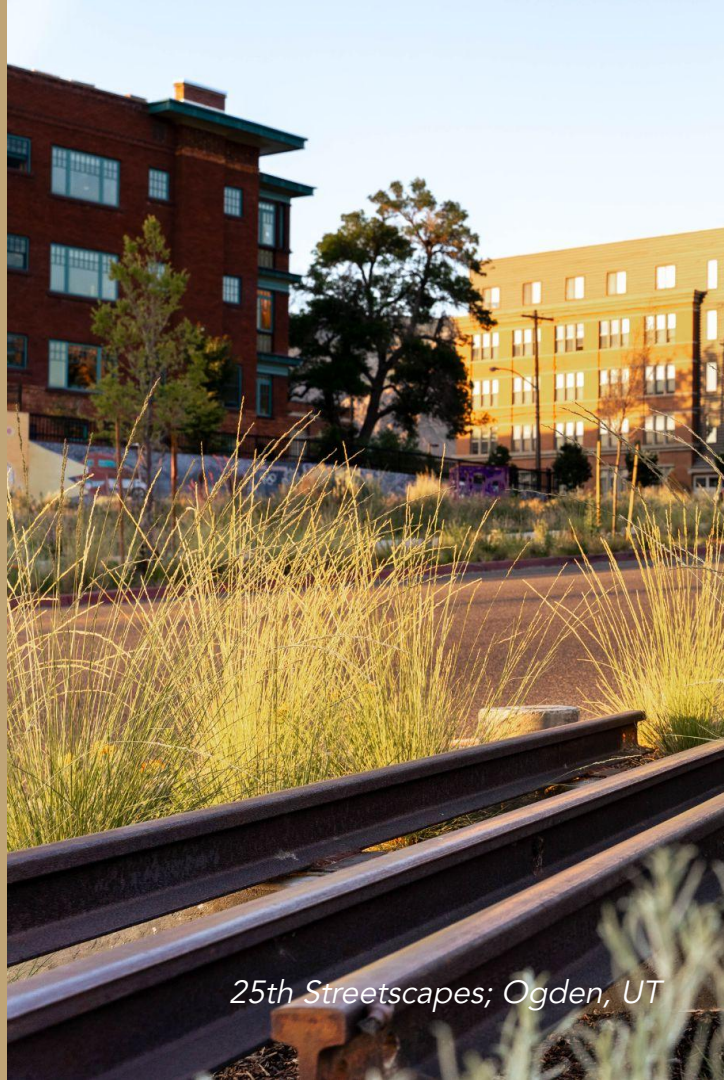
Why Adaptive Reuse Matters Today

Designers increasingly encounter landscapes with existing stories.

Three Emerging Conditions:

1. Post-Industrial Landscapes
2. Aging Cultural Landscapes
3. Ecological Repair Landscapes

Key Idea:
Design increasingly begins with inherited narratives.



25th Streetscapes; Ogden, UT

National Trends & Precedents

Examples:

- High Line
- Brooklyn Bridge Park
- Gas Works Park

Shared Themes:

- Reveal rather than erase
- Layer rather than replace
- Adapt rather than abandon





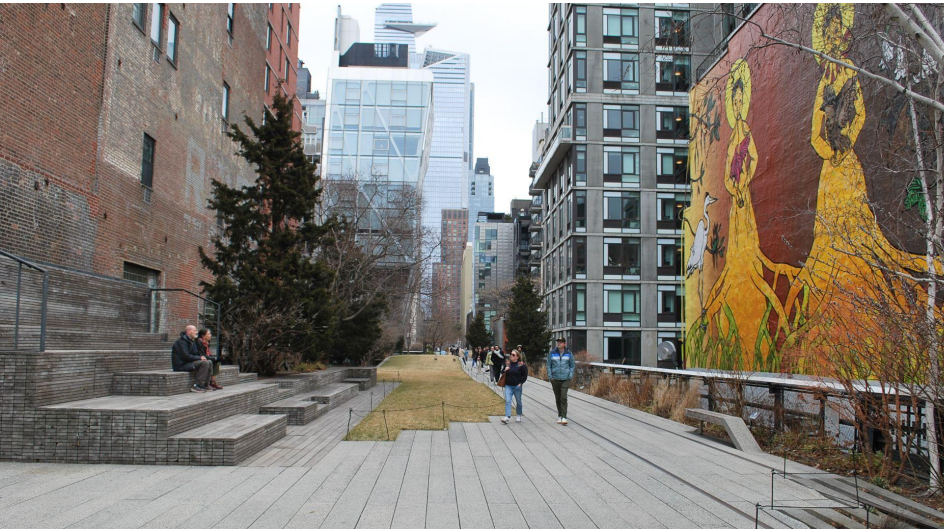













Photo by Aimee Rozier, 2011


Photo by Yuan Ling, 2011


Photo by Aimee Rozier, 2011


Photo by Nai-Hsuan Cheng, 2011

National Trends & Precedents

Examples:

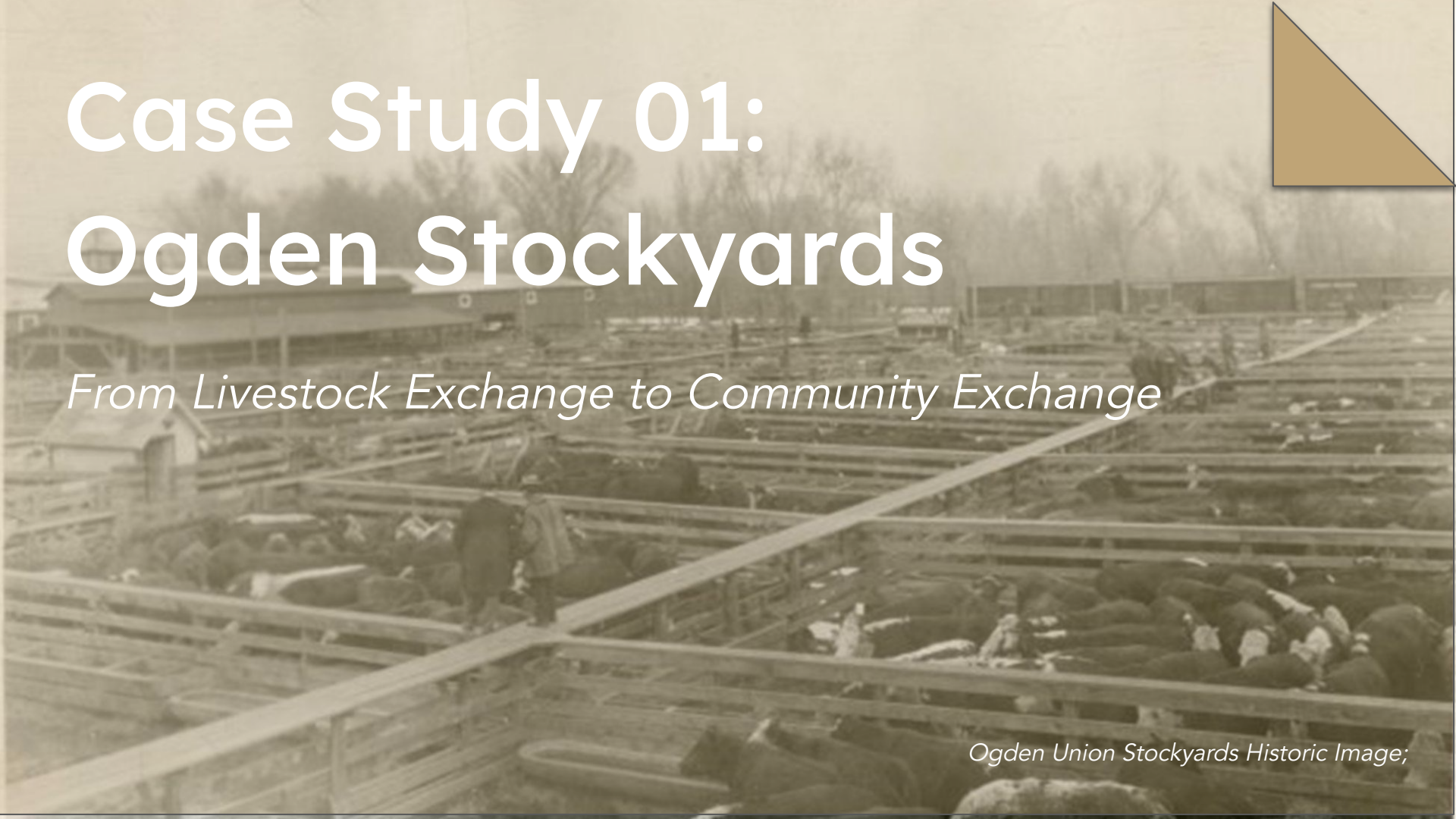
- High Line
- Brooklyn Bridge Park
- Gas Works Park

Shared Themes:

- Reveal rather than erase
- Layer rather than replace
- Adapt rather than abandon

Case Study 01:
Ogden Stockyards

From Livestock Exchange to Community Exchange



Ogden Union Stockyards Historic Image;

Understanding the Story

The Ogden Union Stockyards

Historic Significance:

- Regional livestock industry
  - Largest livestock west of Denver 1916-1971
- Rail transportation
- Economic exchange
- Industrial landscape

Key Question:

What story are we preserving?





Documentation as Design

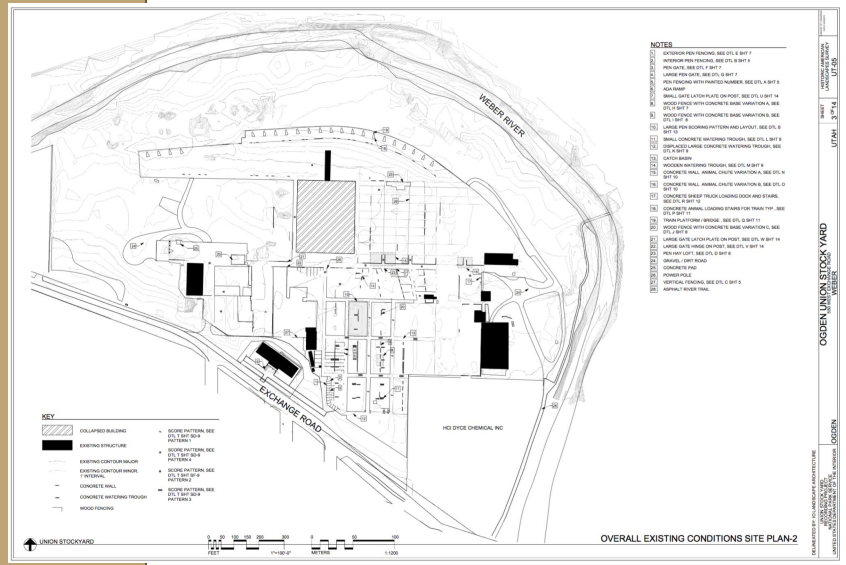
Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS)

Documentation Included:

- Sheep loading ramps
- Watering troughs
- Fencing systems
- Historic paving
- Spatial organization

Key Idea:

Documentation is not just archival—it is a design tool.



Documentation from the HALS Process

What Was Worth Saving?

Preserved:

- Loading ramp promenade
- Historic stamped concrete
- Spatial organization
- Circulation patterns

Not Preserved:

- Extensive pen systems
- Deteriorated infrastructure

Key Idea:

Preserve the elements that continue to tell the story.





Preserving the Promenade

Historic sheep loading ramps remain intact.

Integrated with:

- Regional trail system
- Mountain bike park
- Public open space

Key Idea:

The ramps no longer load sheep, but they still tell the story of loading sheep.



New Uses, Same Story

Historic Use:

- Livestock movement
- Commerce
- Transportation

Current Use:

- Recreation
- Community gathering
- Economic development

Underlying Theme:

- Exchange continues.



Adaptive Reuse Through Interpretation

Historic Detail:

- Triangular loading plates folded down to meet rail cars.

Design Response:

- Interpretive panels fold outward from the ramps.

Key Idea:

- Historic form becomes contemporary storytelling.





Adaptive Reuse Through Transformation

Historic watering troughs reimagined as benches and planters.

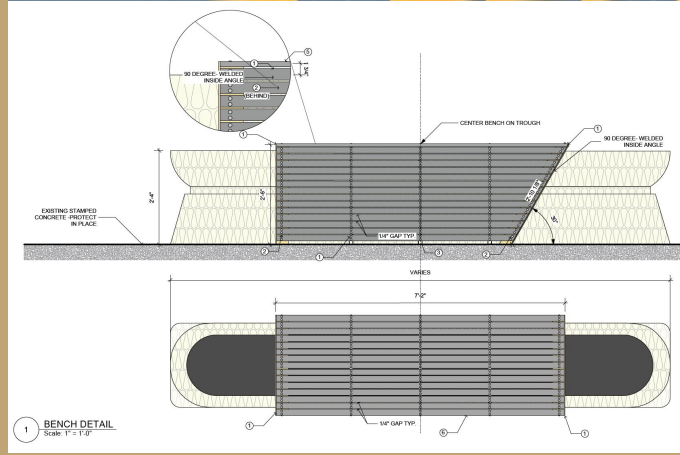
Approach:

- Minimal intervention
- Daily interaction
- Continued visibility

Key Idea:

- Artifacts become experiences.





Carrying the Story Forward

Triangular forms carried into:

- Trail paving
- Graphics
- Site furnishings
- Interpretation

Key Idea:

- Historic forms become a contemporary design vocabulary.



Key Lessons from the Stockyards

- Documentation informs design
- Preserve systems, not just objects
- Interpretation creates meaning
- New uses can reinforce historic narratives

The goal was never to create a museum.
The goal was to keep the landscape legible.

Case Study 02: Allen Park

Preserving the Magic of a Living Landscape



Allen Park

Understanding the Story

Natural Layer:

- Emigration Creek
- Riparian ecology

Cultural Layer:

- Allen family: Dr. Allen purchased 7-acre farm in 1931, and established the property as a bird sanctuary
- Artists
- Naturalists
- Hobbitville

Key Idea:

Nature and culture evolved together.



Historic photo, credit Seven Canyons Trust



Adaptive Reuse is Part of the Site's History

Historic reuse included:

- Cobble paving
- Concrete slabs
- Asphalt
- Tile fragments
- Relocated mining cabins

Key Idea:

Adaptive reuse is itself a character-defining feature.

What Makes Allen Park Special?

Physical Features:

- Cabins
- Stonework
- Creek
- Artwork

Experiential Features:

- Discovery
- Wonder
- Creativity
- Ecological immersion

Key Question:
How do you preserve magic?

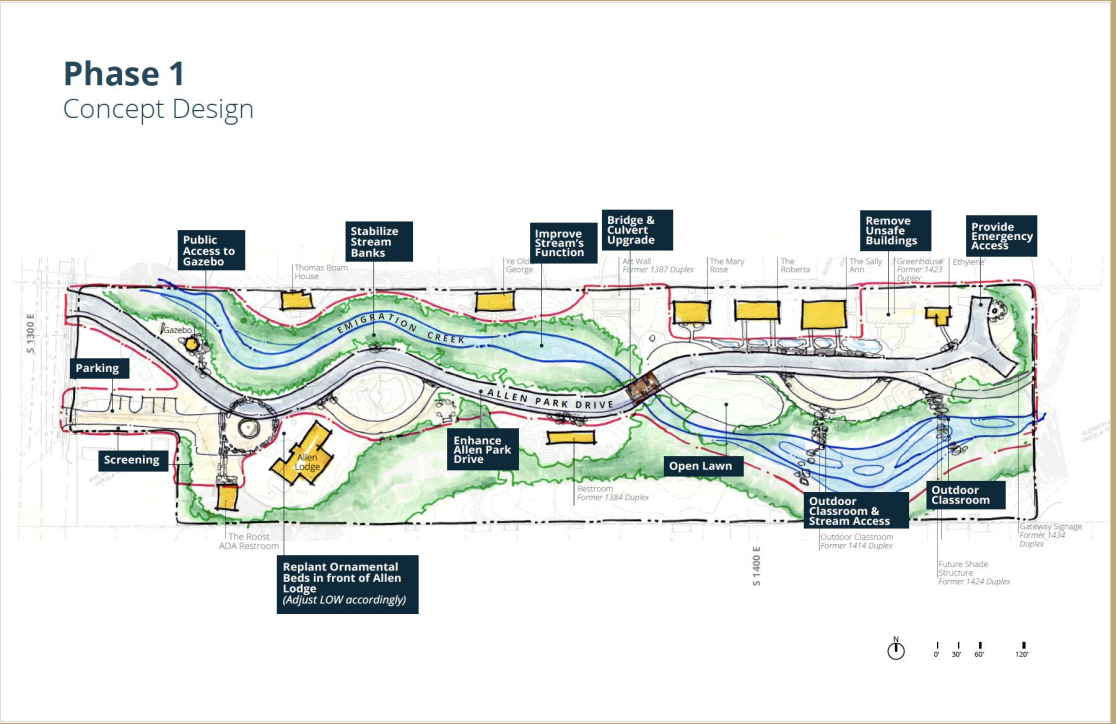
Writing the Next Chapter

Future Vision:

- Community green space
- Artist studios
- Naturalists
- Ecological restoration

Approach:

- Stabilize
- Restore
- Adapt



Allen Park 40% Concept Design; Credit to Sasaki

Adaptive Reuse Through Material Continuity

Design Elements:

- Recycled concrete paving
- Restored structures
- Preserved site features
- Salvaged materials

Key Idea:
The new work follows the same ethos that created the original landscape.





Adaptive Reuse Through Spatial Continuity

Preserve:

- Cabin locations
- Path networks
- Gathering spaces
- Historic relationships

Key Idea:
Preservation is not only about buildings—it is about patterns of occupation.



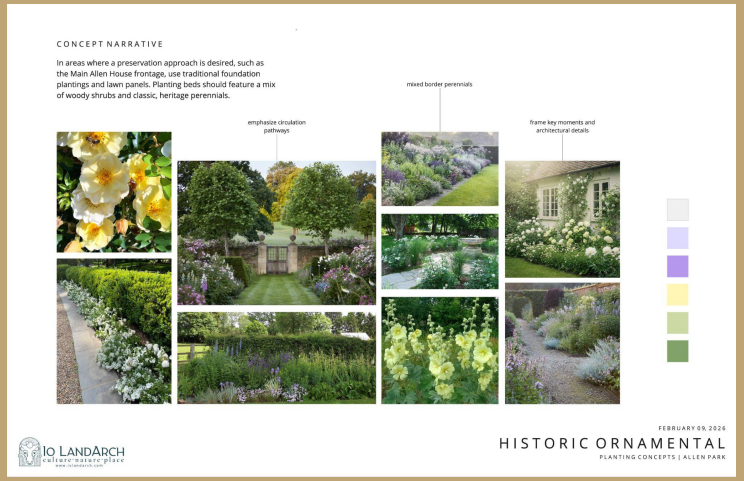
Allen Park 40% Concept Design; Credit to Sasaki

Planting Design as Storytelling

Landscape Gradient:

Allen House
↓
Cottage Gardens
↓
Transitional Landscapes
↓
Ecological Restoration

Key Idea:
The planting design tells the story of the site's relationship with nature.





Managing Time Rather Than Freezing Time

Example: Historic Black Locust Groves

Approach:

- Preserve mature trees
- Allow natural succession
- Introduce Purple Robe Locust
- Maintain character over time

Key Idea:
Preservation often means managing change rather than preventing it.



Landscape of Continuous Reinvention

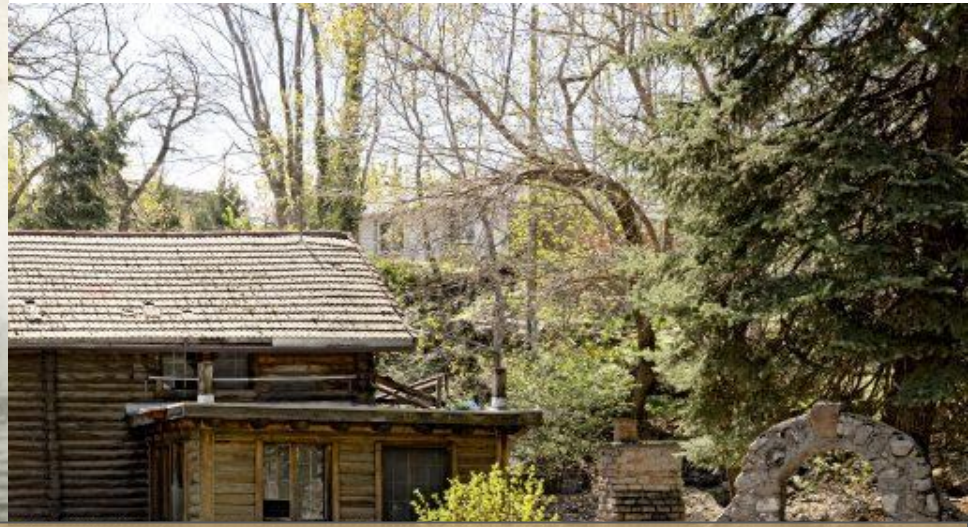
Chapters in Allen Park:

1. Riparian Landscape
2. Allen Family Homestead
3. Hobbitville
4. Period of Decline
5. Community Cultural Landscape

Key Idea:
The goal is not to privilege one chapter—it is to continue the story.

Comparing the Two Projects





Ogden Stockyards

- Commerce
- Infrastructure
- Industrial Landscape
- Movement of Goods

Allen Park

- Creativity
- Domesticity
- Cultural Landscape
- Movement of People

Shared Themes:

- **River systems**
- **Ecology**
- **Community**
- **Adaptive reuse**

Preservation Through Continuity

Ogden Union Stockyards: Commerce continues.

Allen Park: Creativity continues.

Key Idea:

- Historic landscapes survive not because they resist change, but because they adapt while retaining their identity.

Final Thoughts

Preservation is not about stopping change.

It is about guiding change.

Adaptive reuse allows historic landscapes to remain:

- Relevant
- Legible
- Meaningful

The question is not whether historic landscapes will change. The question is whether the next chapter will deepen the story—or erase it.



Questions & Discussion

Thank You!

Shalae Larsen
Io LandArch
www.iolandarch.com

Ogden Union Stockyards; Ogden, UT