

The Southern California ASLA Chapter recently completed a Level 1 Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) documentation for the Virginia Robinson Gardens, an almost entirely volunteer three-year long effort. This documentation includes large-format photography, 43 sheets of measured drawings, and a 163-page written history.

The Virginia Robinson Gardens is a 6.2-acre botanical garden, historic landscape, and residence, located in the heart of Beverly Hills. The home was built in 1911 and is considered Beverly Hill's "First Estate". Virginia Robinson was a garden lover, astute businesswoman, and social influencer of her time. Upon her death, Virginia Robinson bequeathed her property to the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, where it is jointly managed by the County and the Friends of Robinson Gardens. According to our HALS team historians Kelly Comras FASLA and Steven Keylon, "The estate of Harry and Virginia Robinson is highly significant within the history of early twentieth-century landscape design, fitting squarely within the background context of artistic and political influences arising during the country-place era. The property holds significance as a garden estate property that evolved during the early development of the City of Beverly Hills. It is also significant as a place where the highly personal vision of its original owners melded botanical experimentation, intellectual curiosity, and an eclectic design aesthetic that served as a stage for engaging with members of the artistic and political elite of Los Angeles for nearly seventy years. Participants of significance who contributed to the development of the estate include Nathaniel Dryden (architectural designer); Charles Gibbs Adams (landscape architect); Dodd & Richards (architects/engineers); Benjamin Morton Purdy (landscape architect); and Morgan "Bill" Evans (landscape architect)."

This HALS documentation represents thousands of hours of fieldwork, research, and document preparation, performed largely on a volunteer basis. Even when the pandemic restricted access to the site and wreaked havoc with volunteers' schedules, the core group persevered, determined to prepare comprehensive documentation and historical research, as promised to the Friends of the Virginia Robinson Gardens for their generous hosting of a 2017 HALS Training Event led by Janet Gracyk ASLA. The efforts and deliverables will greatly supplement the Friends' application for museum status and represent timely documentation of the retiring superintendent Tim Lindsay's trove of institutional knowledge acquired over the last twenty-three years.

The HALS team included a dynamic combination of over eighteen ASLA and allied professionals and was supported by local landscape architecture and preservation graduate programs (UCLA, Cal Poly Pomona, and USC). The HALS documentation process coincided with the completion of a recent reorganization and digitization of extensive archives, making possible, according to Kelly and Steven "a thoroughly researched history of the site, the correction of handed-down myths and stories, and the establishment of a clear timeline of the development of the site. This project illustrates the collective will of a passionate group of professionals to highlight and preserve a valuable resource in Los Angeles." This project has also cemented a core group of dedicated ASLA and allied professionals who recognize the importance of documenting and preserving precious and fragile landscapes for future generations.

The core team consisted of Alison Terry, HALS Liaison, and Lisa Gimmy, ASLA as lead coordinators, with David Dahlke ASLA heading up the Hardscape documentation and Nicole Volpe ASLA leading the Planting documentation. Landscape historians Kelly Comras FASLA and Steven Keylon, whose work was funded partially through Friends' assistance, wrote the historical narrative, a carefully researched scholarly document. Their immense expertise and experience enabled our HALS documentation to attain Level 1 status. Cal Walsten ASLA and Elaine Walsten ASLA, both former Disney employees along with David Dahlke, contributed to the overall project organization and specimen tree identification.

Linda Endler ASLA and Alison Terry logged substantial hours onsite in plant identification and location. Lisa Gimmy and her employee Jin McFarland ASLA prepared a beautiful Photoshop rendering of the historic Pool House and documented the evolution of the garden. Lisa facilitated all communication with the Friends and created the opportunity for Kelly and Steven to join the team. Alison documented the garden's fountains, and prepared site sections and an illustrative site plan. The Friends generously funded an intern, Katie Owens, from Cal Poly Pomona, to assist in site documentation and coordination with the archivist and historians. Baxter Miller FASLA provided assistance to the Hardscape drawings through his staff member Rogelio Nunez ASLA, and Alison's drafter Patrick Hoesterey spent endless hours digitizing old elevations and merging field measurements and hand drawings to provide accurate details and sections. Dennis Hill, a photographer with experience documenting HALS, HABS and HAER sites, provided the large format photography. Martin Bruinsma, a former Disney artist, painted original watercolors of the gardens. Martin's watercolor sketches capture the feeling of the site and have been used by the Friends for fundraising notecards.

The team is thankful for the unwavering support from the Virginia Robinson Gardens staff and Friends organization, who provided opportunities for us to give visual presentations to all interested parties, and to give us full access to the site including the archives. Christopher Stevens, ASLA, Senior Landscape Architect for the Historic American Landscapes Survey, National Park Service, provided invaluable assistance and review throughout the entire process. The team members have completed this documentation feeling a sense of accomplishment in providing foundational material in the goal of becoming an accredited house museum for the new Superintendent Diane Sipos, as a document for guiding resource protection and management decisions, as a resource for interpretive and education activities, and as a site management tool for evaluation and rehabilitation.