Among all the calamities, large and small, inflicted by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the damage done to Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans was heartbreaking, especially to those charged with renewing the historic landscape. Designed by Ellen Biddle Shipman for Edith and Edgar Stern, the estate is a unity of house and gardens on seven acres, adjacent to breached canals. Shipman – one of the first prominent women in the field – brought in architects William and Geoffrey Platt to develop her design for the circa-1939 Classical Revival mansion. Over a 15-year period from 1935 to 1950, Shipman collaborated with the Sterns and Caroline Dorman, Louisiana’s early conservationist and wild plant expert, to create a distinctive and intricate landscape that included boxwood parterres, a live oak allée, the Wild Garden and a Spanish court. Despite alterations over time, the landscape retained a significant degree of historic integrity, which contributed to Longue Vue’s designation as a national historic landmark in April 2005. Only months later, the hurricane severely damaged that landscape – but it also created a powerful opportunity.

In addition to saturating grasses and littering the site with debris and brush, Katrina’s high winds and the subsequent flooding led to significant loss of the overstory trees and limb damage to the grand oaks that lined the allée. In addition, flooding compromised the root systems of many trees and damaged the underground pumping systems for the site’s more than 20 fountains. Having worked on an extensive documentation effort at Longue Vue in the previous decade, the New England-based firm Heritage Landscapes Preservation Landscape Architects & Planners reached out to Longue Vue to estimate damage, visit the site and seek aid. Subsequently, the Garden Conservancy provided modest funding for a collaborative Longue Vue Landscape Renewal Plan that is guiding staff efforts to replace lost plantings while addressing infrastructure within the constraints of post-Katrina New Orleans. Although there is much more work to be done, visitors are once again enjoying the estate, considered a Shipman masterwork and a premier example of the early-20th-century Country Place era, one of the few of its kind in the American South.

For 22 years, Heritage Landscapes has been engaged in a wide variety of research, planning, design, interpretation, preservation, stewardship and management projects for some of the nation’s most highly valued public landscapes. The firm emphasizes primary source research and careful field review to understand cultural landscapes — and respect them — as a precursor to restoration or rehabilitation interventions. “If you understand the historic landscape with a preservation goal to retain it...”
with a high degree of character, even if you can’t recapture diminished integrity, you can achieve a great deal,” says Patricia O’Donnell, FASLA, AICP, the firm’s founder and principal. “We find that the degradations over time are also opportunities for interpretation.”

**Informed by History**

Cultural landscapes, O’Donnell notes, are places where culture and nature are intertwined to express the interaction of humanity and place. Managing and protecting these landscapes, she believes, involves a similarly integrated approach, combining the methods employed by the historic preservation field in the built environment with the resource conservation processes used for the natural environment. “The nature of the landscape is fully grasped,” she says. “We look at the character-defining features in an inclusive framework. These include spatial organization, land uses, patterns, visual relationships, topography, drainage and water elements, natural systems, vegetation, circulation, landscape structures, small-scale elements and furnishings. In short, the landscape encompasses everything.”

O’Donnell developed a passion for cultural landscapes – and the powerful role they played in society – at an early age. She grew up in Buffalo, NY, a city known for its series of parks and parkways designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and Calvert Vaux, and she earned a bachelor’s degree in environmental design from SUNY College at Buffalo, a university that usurped part of the 1870 Buffalo State Asylum, designed by Olmsted, Vaux, and H.H. Richardson. In the mid-1970s, she initiated a citizen-driven project to replant a formal rose garden that was a later addition to Buffalo’s Delaware Park. For the summers of 1977 and 1978 she led the Youth Conservation Corps, a federal work program for disadvantaged youth, working again in the Buffalo parks system. Through those efforts, she gained respect and understanding for the satisfaction to be found in experiencing and working toward the renewal of cultural landscapes.

In the first half of the 1980s, O’Donnell earned two master’s degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one in landscape architecture (with a concentration in applied behavioral research) and the other in urban planning (with a concentration in historic preservation and landscape preservation). For four years at Walmsley & Company in New York, she managed projects in Prospect Park and City Hall Park and for Boston’s Emerald Necklace. In 1987, she founded Heritage Landscapes. Today, the eight-person firm operates widely from offices in Charlotte, VT, Norwalk, CT, and Asheville, NC.

Despite its small size, the firm has completed about 400 projects and earned 41 professional awards. In addition to being geographically diverse (including sites as distant as Ernest Hemingway’s Cuban property, Finca Vigia), projects address a wide range of landscapes, from small pocket parks, like the modernist Court Street urban renewal landscape in New Haven, CT, and individual historic sites to multiple-property landscapes, linear corridors, campuses, battlefields and public parks systems, like the George Kessler and Arthur Shurcliff inspired parks and boulevards of Fort Wayne, IN.
Many of these places are associated with icons of landscape architecture. In addition to Olmsted and his successor firms, the firm has researched, rehabilitated and restored the work of noted landscape designers such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Graycliff, Fletcher Steele's Camden Amphitheatre, Beatrix Jones Farrand's Dumbarton Oaks, Downing Vaux's Broadway Park, John O Simonds' Mellon Square, and Louis I. Kahn's Trenton Bathhouse, among others. Products include cultural landscape reports, strategic plans, interpretive signs and brochures, construction documents, management plans and maintenance calendars. Projects are grounded in the principles of landscape sustainability, functionality and aesthetics, according to the firm, as well as historic character and integrity.

"Sometimes people think of us as historians, but we are preservation landscape architects informed by history," O'Donnell says. "Documentation and research is an underpinning of our work. What we seek is collaboration with stewards who appreciate the values and cultural importance of landscapes. Together we work toward enhanced understanding and positive visitor experiences."

**Revealing Design Mastery**

Although Thomas Jefferson is better known for his design and planning of Monticello and the University of Virginia, his retreat near Lynchburg, Poplar Forest, can be viewed as a distillation and perfection of a lifetime spent studying architectural styles and pattern books. Jefferson began planning for his retreat during his second term as president in 1806, building an octagonal Palladian villa and core ornamental landscape with symmetrical planting schemes that were visual extensions of the house. Both landscape and house were altered by subsequent owners, and aspects of Jefferson's original landscape became difficult to discern. Of the original 5,000-acre plantation, some 600 acres have been under the stewardship of the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest since 1983.

The altered Poplar Forest landscape has also been the subject of scrutiny. As an initial step, Heritage Landscapes completed a schematic master plan for the property that addresses intervention approaches in three zones: the core area, the plantation and the arrival zone. By examining archival materials and archaeological findings and analyzing the property’s layers of landscape character, the firm was able to determine that portions of the landscape could be partially restored and interpreted. Other projects improved arrival, wayfinding and circulation. “At Poplar Forest, the house is less reconstructed while the landscape remains original and legible,” O'Donnell says. “While it may require interpretation, the landscape record remains on the land.”

The firm gained a similar understanding of the Beatrix Farrand-designed landscape at Dumbarton Oaks, an international research institution in Washington, DC, affiliated with Harvard University. There, the firm worked closely with architects Hartman-Cox Architects for planning and Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates for design, as well as landscape architect James Urban, FASLA, to craft a cultural landscape plan that would allow for a new library to be built while protecting this renowned designed landscape.

Across from the Camden Amphitheatre is Harbor Park, designed by the Olmsted Brothers in the 1930s. The firm collaborated with the community on a sequence of planning and implementation projects for the Camden Library Grounds and Amphitheatre, designed by Fletcher Steele from 1928 to 1931, and the adjacent Harbor Park, designed by the Olmsted Brothers in the 1930s. Completed projects address the restoration of details and materials at the amphitheatre for walls, steps, railings, soils, irrigation and plantings, along with construction documents and administration. New circulation elements such as ADA access, cross-walks and parking arrangements enhanced community use. The concurrent rehabilitation of Harbor Park included reconstructing and installing new paths and an ADA ramp, lighting and irrigation, while at the same time replanting hundreds of shrubs, groundcover and trees, including disease-resistant Princeton elms, to reclaim the original Olmsted character.

"In Camden, here you have two landscapes designed by Fletcher Steele and the Olmsted Brothers," says Peter Viteretto, ASLA, the firm’s senior associate, who has been with the firm for 14 years. “When you work on this kind of site and you see the mastery of the design, it’s often hidden by years of change, but if you understand the landscape you can perceive that mastery immediately. Part of our job is to uncover that and reveal it, and bring that masterwork back to the public focus and into vibrant use.”
“We always approach our projects with an eye toward sustainability,” says Sarah Graulty, a project staff member who was the firm’s first hire with a strictly preservation background as opposed to landscape architecture and preservation. “It’s a matter of making beneficial choices like local materials selection or period light posts modified to avoid light pollution. People assume that preservation is rigid and there isn’t room for different interventions.”

At Valley Forge, for instance, the firm designed a shallow swale system for stormwater management that provided necessary infiltration but was planted with meadow grasses to blend in with the surrounding landscape. The firm has also participated in other high-profile sustainable restoration projects at such places as the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, President Lincoln’s Cottage and Smith Visitor Center in Washington, DC, and the Capitol at West Virginia, all with RMJM Architects. For the Lincoln Cottage, the visitor center project brought together the U.S. Green Building Council and the National Trust for Historic Preservation for the first LEED pilot addressing the rehabilitation of an historic structure and landscape.

“We are grateful to work on significant properties with talented teams and committed owners,” O’Donnell says. The landscape preservation direction for our projects is most frequently rehabilitation – respecting the character and features remaining while accommodating current and future uses and sustainability. With preservation as a sustainable basis, the landscape is preserved while achieving the mission of the property as a vibrant, valued place for today and tomorrow.”

“Sometimes, the firm brings crucial aspects of history back into focus as well. At Valley Forge National Historical Park, a significant historic site and commemorative landscape outside Philadelphia, the firm combined research and an existing conditions analysis to recommend preservation interventions that would remove modern intrusions, clarify circulation routes, and at the same time recapture historic patterns. In particular, the team reoriented the site in relation to the Schuylkill River and Valley Creek, emphasizing topographical features that had everything to do with why the encampment site was chosen but whose importance was obscured over time. “We reoriented visitors so they had a sense of the historic topography and water systems,” Viteretto says. “It’s about making that history part of the story and part of the interpretation.”

Sustainability
As many firms are doing, Heritage Landscapes has also placed a particular emphasis on sustainability in its recent and current projects. The key difference from many firms, however, is that Heritage Landscapes has always understood the sustainability inherent in historic designed landscapes. The Olmsteds, according to Viteretto, had a keen understanding for how stormwater flowed over the land and they designed the landscape and chose plantings and groundcover that could accommodate those instances. Heritage Landscapes’s work is often to enhance or expand on those features to meet modern needs.

“Working with RMJM Architects, Heritage Landscapes provided landscape preservation services for a multi-disciplinary team involved in the Virginia State Capitol restoration in Richmond. Sustainable aspects included limited site disturbance, tree protection, and the addition of a small green roof and reuse of historic materials. Paving to the south of the portico (right) was designed as the Inaugural Plaza using a two-tone gray diamond granite paving pattern.

At President Lincoln’s Cottage in Washington, DC, Heritage Landscapes, RMJM Architects, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation worked together to rehabilitate both the historic structure and landscape and a nearby building that became the cottage’s visitor center, a project that has since been certified under the LEED system.