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Education Values in the New Neilson Library Landscape

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**Introduction**

We define landscape as our physical surroundings and constructed environment and the sum of our experiences with them. These experiences are often guided by human interaction with nature as we take in sensory information and physically move through the landscape; this allows us to form connections and memories within it.

**The Goal:** Through this lens, our goal is to improve the Neilson Library landscape in the redesign. Our primary focus is exploring how educational landscape elements can be implemented in this redesign through three main principles: historical Olmstedian design, sustainable ecological design, and botanic garden and horticultural design.

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**Olmstedian Design**

The firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. designed a comprehensive scheme for Smith’s campus in 1893. To integrate the new Neilson Library into its surroundings, we must keep in mind Olmstedian principles of design.

- “Pastoral” and “picturesque”
- Elements arranged in unified composition
- Closeness of students to nature; promote health
- Constructed, maintained, unified natural areas
- Variety of plantings

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**Ecological Design**

Smith College has embraced the 21st century with our commitment to sustainable, environmentally-beneficial design. The new Neilson Library should incorporate this movement’s ideals.

- Minimizing negative environmental impact
- Restoration of natural streams/systems/wildlife habitat
- Integration of appropriate technologies or infrastructure
- Sustainable construction, for example with recycled materials or offsetting carbon costs
- Student involvement in project upkeep
- Education about sustainability

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**Botanic Design**

The mission of the Smith College Botanic Garden is to foster education about the science, beauty, and importance of plants. Neilson Library is connected to the campus-wide Botanic Garden both through the nearby Mary Maples Dunn Garden and the nationally-recognized Metasequoia. The renovated Neilson library could incorporate the principles of a botanic garden, which include:

- Educational about plants and their science/importance/beauty
- Aesthetic improvement of space
- Maintaining collections of plants
- A variety of plantings
  - Native and exotic species
  - Presentation and research of those plantings

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**Metasequoia and Garden**

**Olmstedian Design:**

- Constructed natural space with three-tiered plantings (groundcover, shrub, tree)
- Maintains aesthetic beauty year-round

**Botanic Design:**

- Could serve as an extension of the Mary Maples Dunn Garden
- Incorporate plants with winter interest
- Historic preservation of nationally recognized tree significant to paleobotany
- Labeled signs around the tree
- Significant element in the Arboretum collection managed by the Botanic Garden

**Sustainable Design:**

- Preserves metasequoia
- Minimizes turf chemical and water input
- Would protect the tree from lawn herbicides and pesticides, soil compression from foot traffic, mowing damage

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**Conclusion**

A successful landscape is one that reorganizes space to facilitate human needs and provide aesthetic appeal. The Neilson Library redesign gives Smith College a perfect opportunity to contemplate 21st century design. Our hope for this project is to incorporate an educational program for the library that includes aspects of Olmstedian, botanic garden, and sustainable design. We believe that these suggested projects would incorporate these aspects, as well as benefit the landscape of Neilson Library by creating a more inviting and interactive space.