



Detail of *Clouds over Olana*, 1872, by Frederic Edwin Church, Oil on paper 8 3/16 x 12 1/8 inches, OL.1976.1. Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

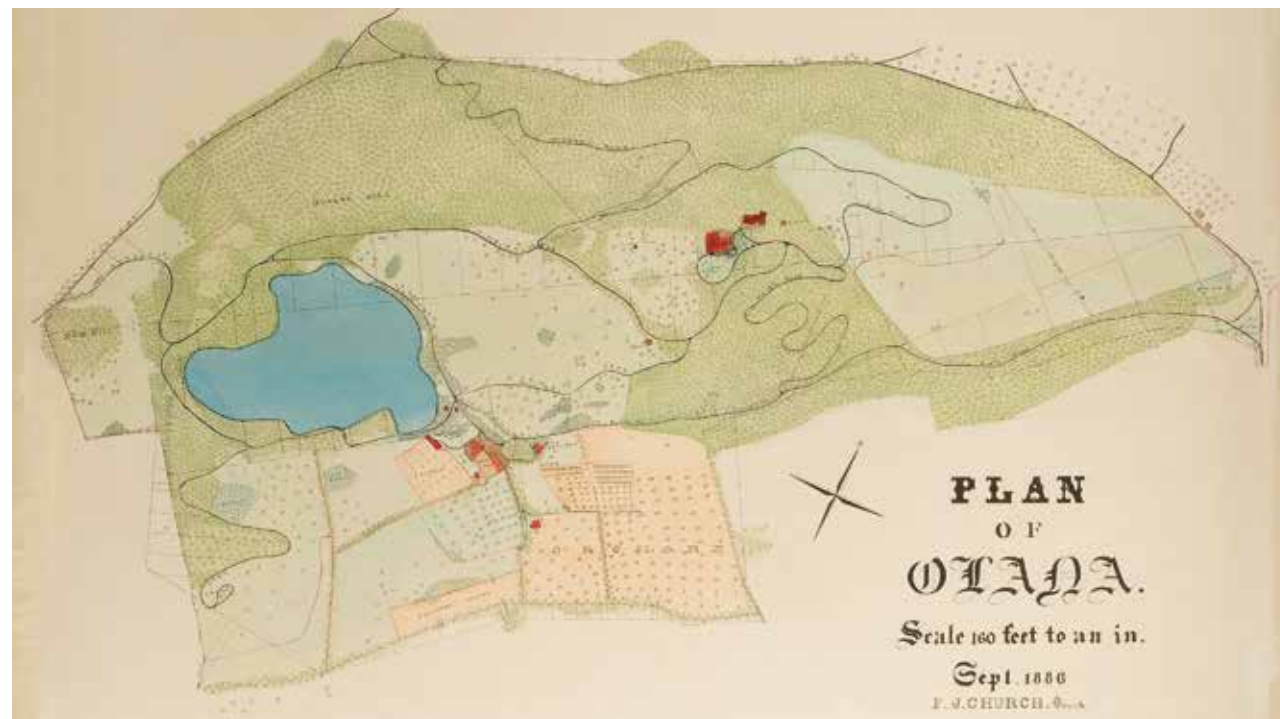
A VIEW OF THE WORLD

THE RESTORATION OF OLANA, THE HOME OF THE PAINTER FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH, RECOVERS A PHILOSOPHY OF ART AND LIFE HE EMBEDDED IN THE LANDSCAPE.

BY MAC GRISWOLD

“I AM BUSY LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURING. I have nearly completed a cliff about a hundred feet in height,” wrote the American landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church to a friend in 1887, using the approximate term for the profession a decade before the founding of the American Society of Landscape Architects. The “cliff” was probably the sheer western side of the hill on which he’d built his house, Olana, high above the Hudson River. Church added his new studio wing in that location the same year.

Sixty-one years old and painfully crippled by arthritis, Church had painted mesmerizing panoramas that gripped American and European audiences at midcentury, beginning with *Niagara* in 1857. Then, in 1859, came the public display at the Lyrique Hall in New York of a single jaw-dropping painting, *The Heart of the Andes* (about five by 10 feet). Its scope sweeps from



BETH SCHNECK PHOTOGRAPHY, 2013. BSCHNECKPHOTO.COM. TOP: FREDERIC JOSEPH CHURCH, PLAN OF OLANA, SEPTEMBER 1886, INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 1/4 X 35 3/8 IN. COLLECTION OLANA STATE HISTORIC SITE, NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION, AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION, BOTTOM

ABOVE

The sweeping Hudson River and Olana's renewed landscape today, seen from Church's "castle."

OPPOSITE

The painter's son, Frederic J. Church, mapped the nearly completed landscape in 1886.

Ecuador's distant, snow-covered Mount Chimborazo down to a foreground plantscape so microscopically detailed and botanically correct that some dizzied viewers—who had been provided with opera glasses—even fainted.

Tastes changed. The triumphal national narrative celebrated in Church's work fell out of favor after the Civil War. Church's reputation by the time of his death in 1900 was totally eclipsed. The beauty of his great Persian-style "castle" was uglified by 20th-century tastemakers into a "Victorian" monstrosity. His views were scumbled and blurred by unchecked growth. Land was sold, outbuildings demolished, corners lopped off the property by

state road incursions. The designed landscape inadvertently survived—silent but intact. The young art historian David Huntington, visiting the dilapidated house in 1953, was staggered by what he saw, including a trove of Church's sketches of his property and a detailed 1886 map of the place.

The spectacularly rapid story of Olana's initial salvation from proposed auction and land development in 1964 has been told elsewhere, most completely by the landscape historian and professor of American studies David Schuyler, who sits on Olana's National Advisory Committee. Importantly, by 1966 New York State had become Olana's proud owner, as vested in the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. A nonprofit, the forerunner of what is now known as the Olana Partnership, led the site development.

COMBINED STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE DESIGN PLAN

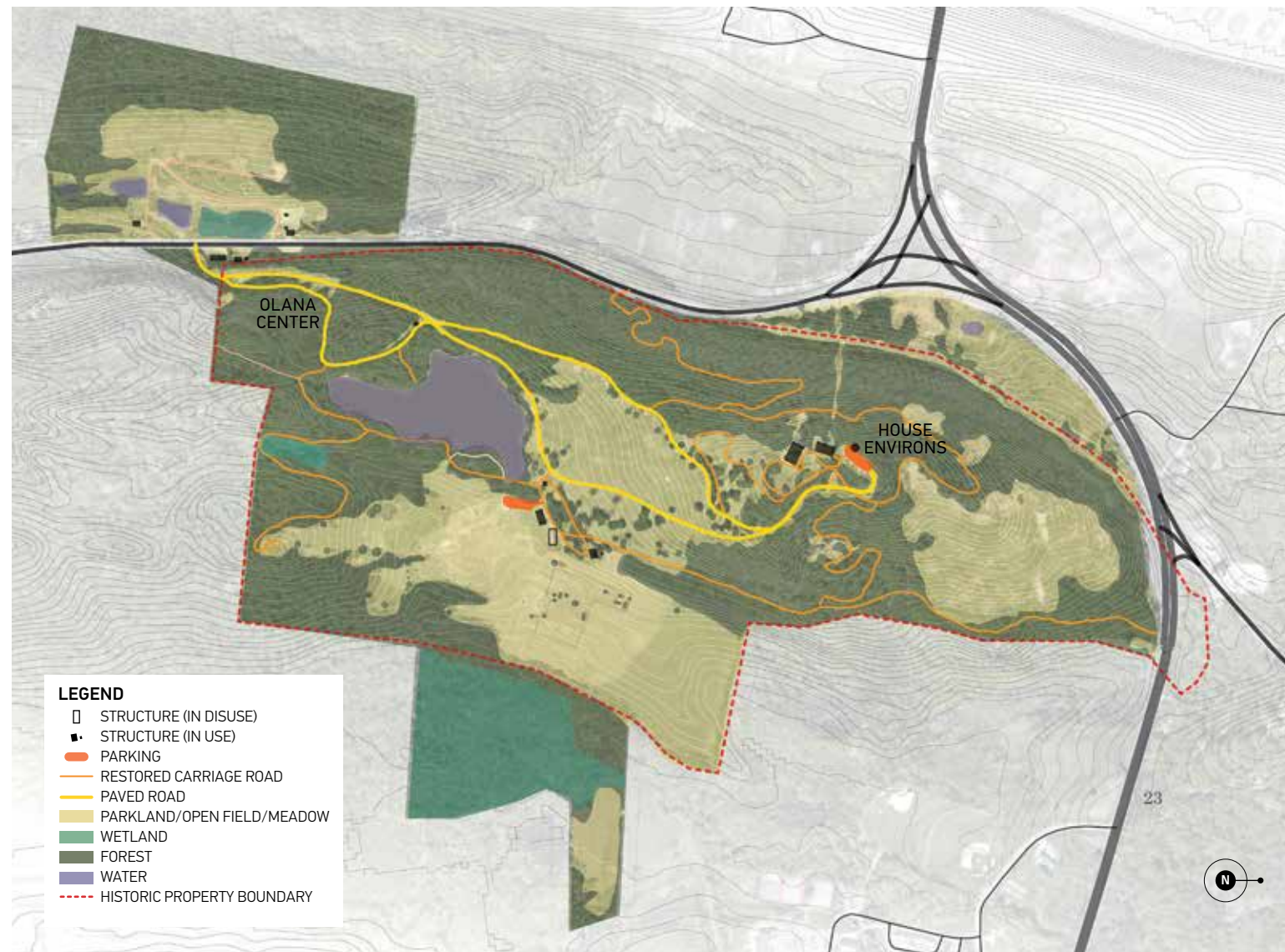


More than 40 years later, in 2009, the Cultural Landscape Foundation added Olana to Landslide, its watch list of public landscape treasures at risk. (The term “cultural landscape” was only clearly defined in 1994 with National Park Service Preservation Brief 36, *Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment, and Management of Historic Landscapes*, by Charles Birnbaum, FASLA.) The 20th-century childhood of a national cultural landscape movement coincided with the early steps of Olana’s recognition as a landscape masterwork.

ABOVE
The painter’s view of the river and the Hudson Highlands from his studio window.

As the house restoration neared stability, more serious attention was paid to treating Church’s design of his home surroundings as a work of art. A white paper, also by Birnbaum, singles out the 1996 historic landscape report by the landscape architect Robert M. Toole to be “the essential starting

EXISTING LAND USE



HISTORIC LAND USE



point for understanding the evolution of Olana’s visual and spatial relationships over time.” Then came the hiring of a landscape curator. Thomas Woltz, FASLA, of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBWLA), whose firm was first engaged in 2011, recalled, “We had come to an object that had been saved—the house, at a cost of many millions—but the irony was, nothing of the intentional and composed landscape remained truly visible.”

Piece by piece, with funding through private donations and New York State grants, and with assistance from the state parks commissioner Rose Harvey and the deputy commissioner for capital projects John Pocarobba, parts of Church’s original visionary landscape were brought back: first the farm, then parts of the wider landscape and the house environs. The historic footprints

of agricultural fields were located; native meadows were established with the help of the ecological landscape designer Larry Weaner, Affiliate ASLA; second-growth and invasive plants were removed.

In 2015, restoration of the house environs alone ran to nearly half a million dollars, two-thirds of it from the state, the remainder raised by the Olana Partnership. A massive retaining wall that cradles the house on its rocky overlook was repaired. The plant orders for what is referred to as “the Mingled Garden,” Olana’s sole “flower garden,” were used to replant the area. That year, Church’s prized borrowed view from Olana over the “cliff” to the river below was cleared for the

first time in decades and the steep slope was replanted with natives.

“We had to figure out a way to share ecology goals with the state,” says Woltz, looking back over the process so far. “We had to be able to clear trees [not a Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) practice] so as to create a warm season native meadow, increase habitat, encourage greater biodiversity. We had to find the confluence of values and principles with the DEC to break down siloed science.”

As each step unfolded, and particularly as Church’s five miles of carriage roads were stabilized and

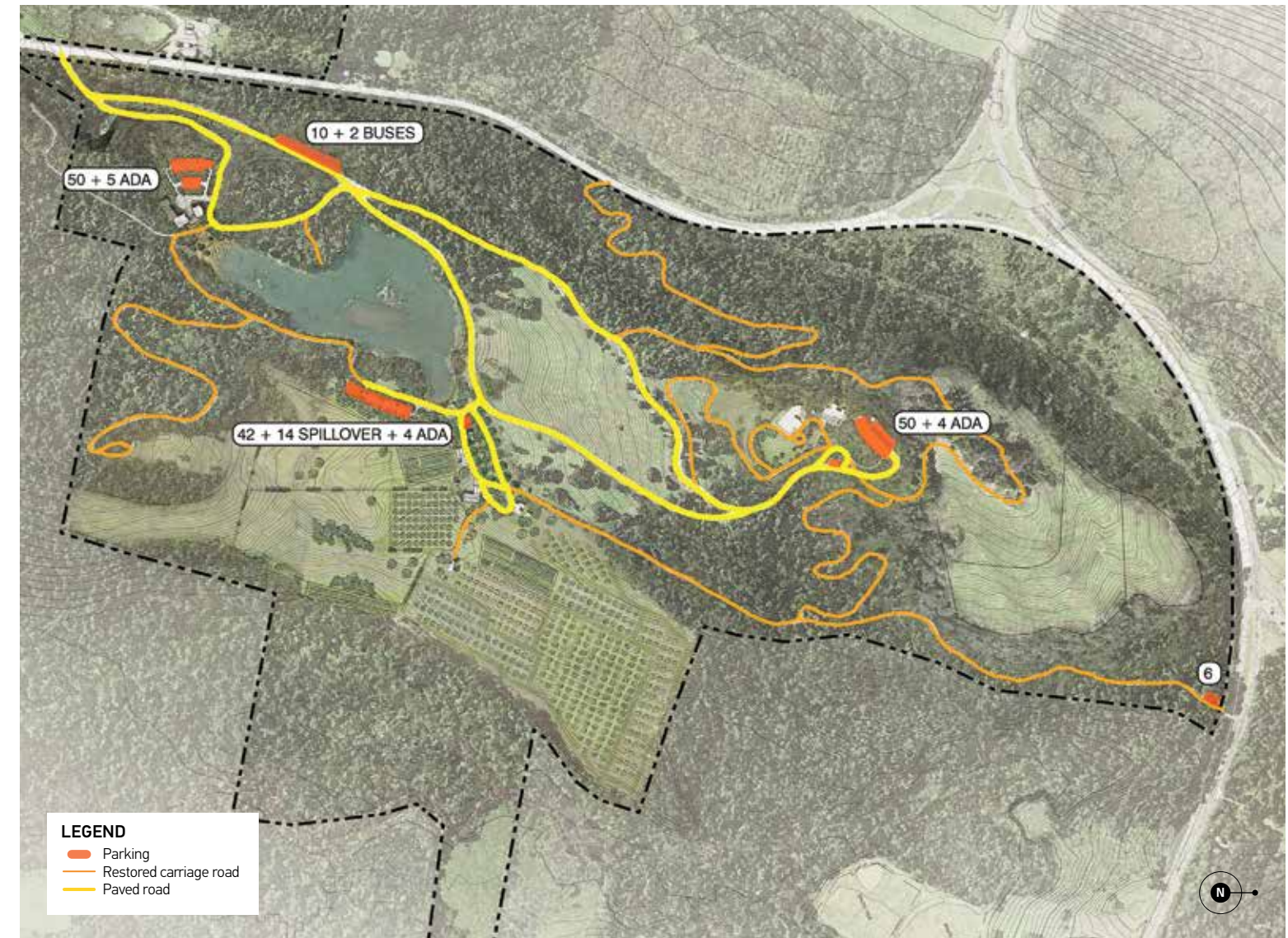
some returned to their original 10-foot width, the understanding of views both internal and borrowed grew. Multiple vantage points designed by Church were cleared around the full 360 degrees of the house’s elevation. Church’s original approach up the steep slope to the house proved to be too convoluted for today’s proposed visitation traffic. However, the present-day route still sticks close to the west shore of a 10-acre lake, the sight of which announces to visitors that they have arrived at Olana.

The landscape of Olana was Church’s culminating work of art. The artist himself recognized what he was doing. In a letter to a friend he wrote in 1884, “I have made about one and three-quarters miles of roads this season, opening entirely new and beautiful views—I can make more and better landscapes in this way than by tampering with canvas and paint

HISTORIC VIEWSHED



CIRCULATION



in the Studio.” As one of Central Park’s commissioners, and a friend of Frederick Law Olmsted, Church was familiar with what Olmsted called “passages of scenery,” both internal and external to a composition.

“The viewshed was Church’s muse,” says Mark Prezorski, Olana’s senior vice president and creative director. Ned Sullivan, the president of Scenic Hudson, Inc., which has helped negotiate practical solutions to proposed intrusions into the Olana viewshed, notes that today Hudson River Valley easements include nearly 3,000 acres of what Olana “sees.” Those acres protect not only the views themselves but also agricultural and ecological resources, endangered species, and orchards. In a national political climate that emphatically does not favor conservation or grassroots environmentalism,

the long record in the Hudson River Valley (dating to the 1960s) of managing growth to the benefit of all players—including Olana—stands as a landmark.

The Strategic Landscape Design Plan for Olana, a crucial document that resulted from a highly collaborative process between the client and multiple consultants, tallies existing site conditions and strenuously evaluates Olana’s future development. NBWLA, which received a 2017 ASLA Professional Honor Award for the plan, took the lead, partnering with the LA Group, a Saratoga Springs, New York, firm already under contract with the state. The landscape architect and histo-

rian Suzanne Turner, FASLA, of Suzanne Turner Associates, created a comprehensive timeline (1794–2012) to ensure fidelity to “Church’s career-long, three-dimensional composition—the Olana landscape.” The state’s Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation conducted a detailed woodland survey. Given how drastically historic house visitation has shrunk nationwide, the team called on Camoin Associates, economic analysts and development planners, to conduct tourism market studies. Input from an experienced Hudson River Valley farmer, Zach Wolf, then the director of the Growing Farmers Initiative at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, was critical to developing Olana’s

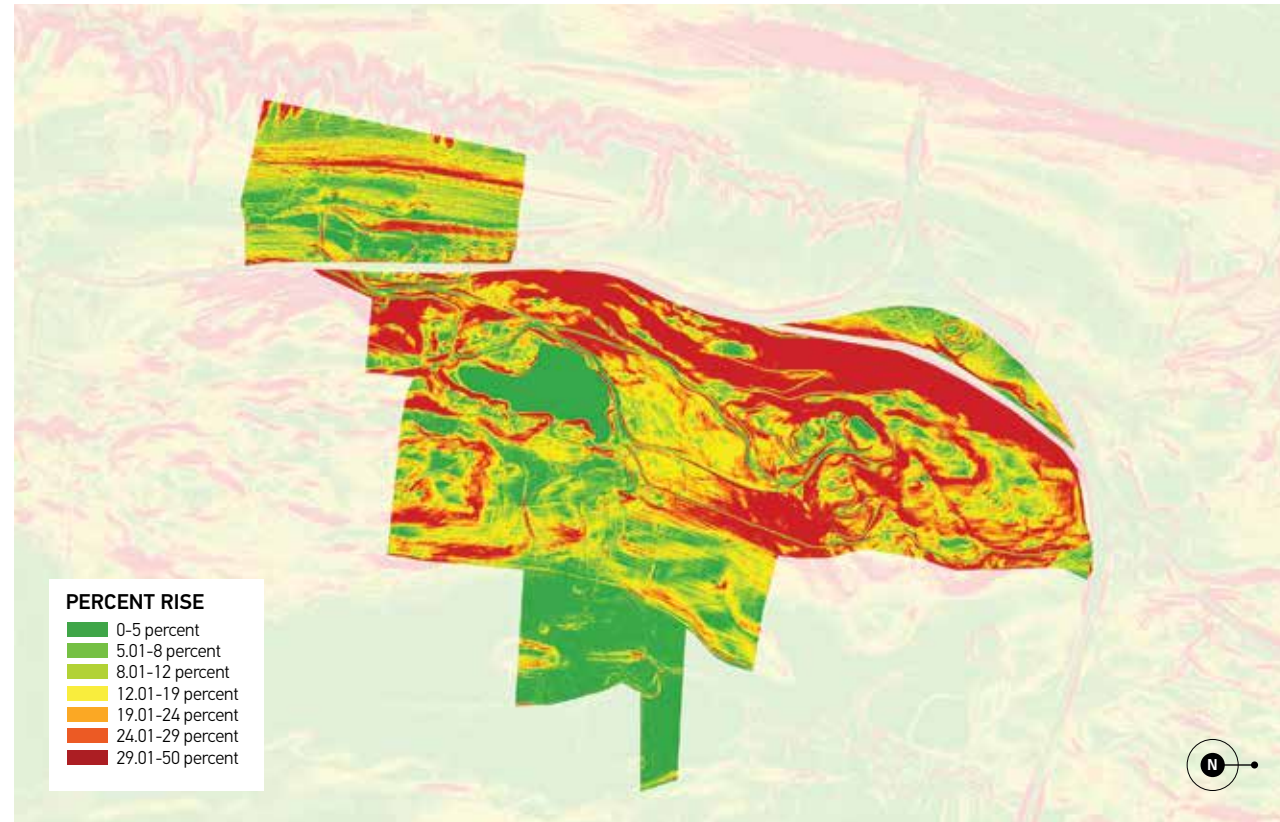
farm plan. The LA Group spearheaded a flexible long-term budget that itemizes big-ticket projects, a program vital for fund-raising.

THE GIFTED 18-year-old Church first came to the Hudson River Valley in 1844 to study with the landscape painter Thomas Cole, later acknowledged as the founder of the Hudson River School. That artistic apprenticeship was followed by a two-year tropical trek across South America, passionately tracking the footsteps of his intellectual mentor, Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian geographer, naturalist, and explorer. In his wide-ranging scientific treatise, *Cosmos*, Humboldt classed landscape painting as a principal mode for expressing love of nature. Church set out to be the consummate landscape painter, and succeeded. The landscape architect Laurie

NELSON BYRD WOLTZ / THE LA GROUP

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SLOPE ANALYSIS

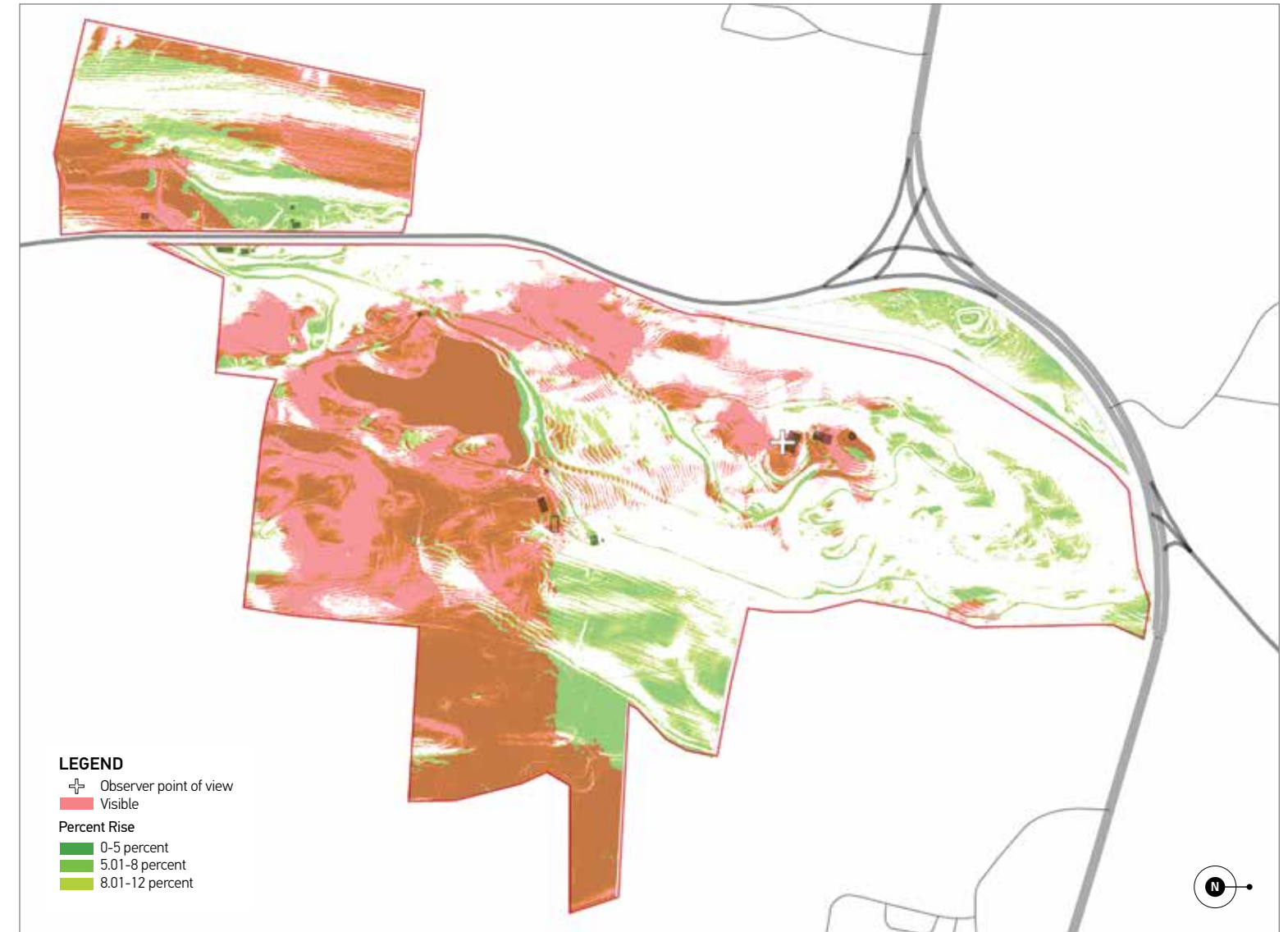


THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE
A white cross marks the house. Combined slope and visibility studies produced an ideal visitor center location that maximizes views from the center while remaining unseen from the house.

VISIBILITY ANALYSIS



VISIBILITY AND SLOPE COMPOSITE



Olin, FASLA, who has scrutinized Olana and Church's depictions of it over the past decade, says, "It's a design, a composition, a painter's composition of a world that Church then turned around, and from which he made his own work."

Both in art and in life, Church was drawn to the rocky physiognomy of mountains—the Andes, the sandstone cliffs of Jordan's Petra, the Hudson Highlands. The artist bought the hilly, worn-out farm directly across the river from Cole's studio in 1860. He and Isabel Carnes married—she became the mother of six. Richard Morris Hunt designed a picturesque new residence, Cosy Cottage, their vine-draped home for 10 years. The

old farmland was revived and transformed into a productive American *ferme ornée*. Within only a few years, Church had planted "several thousand trees"—both nursery stock for orchards and native species for the beginnings of his long campaign to reforest his property. He fertilized with his own matured compost: "muck" excavated from the farm's swamp bottom. As early as 1864, Church had formulated a "comprehensive landscape design scheme for the future" although he had not yet acquired the steep acreage where the new house would stand.

In 1865 the Churches' two young children, their first, died of diphtheria within one week. Rebuilding their lives, in 1867 they set off on a pilgrimage to the Old World, most notably the Middle East. For 18 months Church sought and found

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PORTION OF NORTH ORCHARD TO BE EVALUATED AT A LATER DATE DUE TO CURRENT PRESENCE OF RARE PLANT SPECIES IN THIS LOCATION

HOUSE ENVIRONS PLAN

PLAN

- 1 VIEWSHED RESTORATION
- 2 LAWN TERRACE/ PLINTH RESTORATION
- 3 WALL REHABILITATION
- 4 PAVEMENT ALTERATION
- 5 BUS TURNAROUND
- 6 PATH FROM UPPER PARKING LOT TO BUS TURNAROUND
- 7 SCREEN PLANTING APPROACH
- 8 MINGLED GARDEN
- 9 FERN GARDEN
- 10 RESTORATION OF EAST LAWN
- 11 PLANTING AT COACHMAN'S HOUSE
- 12 PARKLAND RESTORATION



blazing light, ancient empires, fresh artistic inspiration for new landscape canvases—and renewed Christian belief.

Church was part of a midcentury transatlantic intellectual boom, scientific as well as artistic. It produced a torrent of influential ideas, works, and discoveries about nature, and in sciences such as geology and the field of ecology (a term coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1869). In 1854, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* focused on the homestead in the wilderness, a theme that engaged many American artists, including Church, during a time when society was “torn between a worship of nature and a need to dominate it,” as Turner writes. In 1859, the year that *The Heart of the Andes* caused such a public stir, Alexander von Humboldt died and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* appeared.

Every great designed landscape is powered by ideas inscribed wordlessly on the soil itself. Restoration of place presupposes a deep understanding of the philosophy—even the psychology—of its maker, and of the historic context over time. For example, Church espoused Humboldt's encompassing view of creation, science, and nature, a view that fit comfortably with his own Christian beliefs. Darwin's theory of random natural selection—competition and struggle—shredded that comfort. During the ensuing decades while Church shaped Olana, the debate between Humboldt and Darwin raged in public and private. “Humboldt's concept of nature—what he called ‘one great whole animated by

the breath of life’—would come to seem like a beautiful, but impossible, vision,” writes the art historian Jennifer Raab in *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (Yale University Press, 2015).

Both Raab and Stephen Jay Gould, the American paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and science writer, even while admitting other factors were at work in Church's creation of Olana's landscape—rheumatism, no market for his paintings—touch on what they see as Church's wrestling match within himself. “You could feel the bones of the design,” Woltz recalls. “We unearthed them, and found the voice.” The team

used three primary discovery methods, he adds: high-tech mapping, calculations of slopes and grades, and art history. “Our tools were gigantic,” he continues, “chain saws and huge seeding and grading equipment. The moves are big and compositional.”

Olana's scale and “the bones,” the basic materials—stone, soil, water, slopes, massed vegetation, and views—invite comparison with works by 20th-century earthworks artists such as Richard Long, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, James Turrell, and others who created site-specific works. Smithson, before he created *Spiral Jetty*, called Olmsted the first “earthworks artist.” Like them, Church was establishing the importance of designed landscape as art, but his purpose differed. For them, land art began as a

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LEFT
The painter framed his distant south view with Persian architecture.

OPPOSITE
A north-facing aerial catches the lake, the farm, and a viewshed preserved by easement and purchase.

protest with a desire to divorce themselves from the gallery market. It developed into an exploration of process, entropy, the ephemeral.

The resolution Church presented within his landscape composition was Humboldt's—that nature is an ordered web, integrated, collaborative, and purposeful. Church's argument, within *himself* and as a Christian, was with Darwin's mechanism of natural selection. If Church's library records are correct, although he owned Darwin's other works, his library (110 books on science and natural history) did not include *On the Origin of Species*. Church's answer to the Humboldt/Darwin discourse—which would historically end badly for Christian belief in the rock-solid perfectibility of nature—was expressed as a holistic design. Olana's entirety, in detail as well as viewshed, deserves a place within the questioning America of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson.

THE GIGANTIC planning exercise that is the strategic design plan ultimately “positions Olana for future growth, which is inevitable, based on many other factors in the region,” says Prezorski. The site selected for the Olana Center was chosen after consideration of 13 possibilities, winnowed to five, then two. The team identified a broad triangle within the prop-

erty as the historic core: main house, farm complex, and the lake. Along with questions of parking, slopes, and grades, the team also asked themselves “At what point does your body feel at rest? Safe in the Olana landscape?” The 4,500-square-foot building (planned to expand to 7,500 square feet) and 50-car parking lot close to the main entrance will be nestled almost invisibly within a dip in the land south of the lake. Its viewshed opens successively to the lake, then the farm complex, the parkland, and beyond to the main house. It will create a visitor who perceives both Church the artist and a landscape that is far more than a house surrounding. Equally important, although visitors will be able to see the house from the center, and from there be able to take most of the walks toward and around the house, the house will not see the center. Finally,



ANDY WAINWRIGHT, LEFT

STEVE COHEN PHOTOGRAPHY



BELOW

Church worked closely with the architect Calvert Vaux on the design of the main house at Olana.

OPPOSITE

Above the visitor center site, a newly cleared and planted native meadow opens a view across the farm to the distant house.



the team analyzed views from all major internal points on the property out across the wider landscape to the Hudson and the Catskills. They concluded, “If Olana has a mandate to protect views, Olana should not compromise views to and from Olana.”

Despite its heavy programmatic freight (balancing biographical, artistic, historical, environmental, ecological, and visitation requirements), the design plan effectively exposes and heightens—without altering—Church’s achievement. “For the first time since Church’s death,” says Sean Sawyer, the partnership’s president, “the [plan] has given us a map to reunify Olana’s diverse elements.” A work of art, a public park with renewed healthy woodlands as well as open spaces, a sustainable farm, a linchpin of the regional economy, a magnet attracting private and public regional easements, a benchmark for the forensic restoration, preservation, and management of any historic site: This is Olana, past, present, and future. ●

MAC GRISWOLD IS A MEMBER OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE FOUNDATION’S STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL. HER MOST RECENT BOOK IS *THE MANOR: THREE CENTURIES AT A SLAVE PLANTATION ON LONG ISLAND* (FARRAR, STRAUS, AND GIROUX, 2013).

BETH SCHNECK PHOTOGRAPHY; BSCHNECKPHOTO.COM. TOP RIGHT: MARK PREZORSKI. OPPOSITE