Against all Odds

MIT’s Pioneering Women of Landscape Architecture

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A research project by Eran Ben-Joseph, Holly D. Ben-Joseph and Anne Dodge
MIT School of Architecture and Planning
The influential, yet little known and short-lived landscape architecture program at MIT was offered between 1900 and 1909.

It was one of only two formal landscape architecture education programs in the United States at the time, and the first and only one to admit women.
Women students were attracted to the MIT option because it provided excellent opportunities that they were denied elsewhere.

Harvard, for example did not admit women until 1942 and all-women institutions such as the Cambridge School or the Cornell program were established after the MIT program was terminated.
The MIT program didn’t keep women from the well-known academic leaders of the time, such as Charles S. Sargent, Guy Lowell, and Francis Ward Chandler, nor from their male counterparts.
Several of MIT’s female students went on to be well known landscape architects, authors and teachers.

Rose Standish Nichols (1872-1960), was best known as a landscape gardener and author. She wrote several books including *English Pleasure Gardens* (1902), *Italian Pleasure Gardens* (1928) and *Spanish and Portuguese Gardens* (1924).
Marion C. Coffin (1877-1957), an active practitioner, received her degree from MIT in 1904. Some of Coffin’s best known projects include her designs for the grounds of Winterthur, the Henry F. du Pont estate and for the University of Delaware.

She won the Gold Medal of the Architectural League of New York for her work in 1930. Coffin was highly regarded in the field and perhaps the best known female landscape architect to graduate from MIT.
Mabel K. Babcock (1862-1931), received her degree from MIT in 1908. She had not only an active practice but also taught landscape architecture courses at Wellesley College from 1910-1914.

Among her best known designs are the MIT President’s garden and Great (Killian) Court, and the campuses at Wellesley and Bates College in Maine.