THE SCHWEIKHER-LANGSDORF HOUSE & STUDIO MUSEUM
(Willow House)
645 South Meacham Road
Schaumburg
Cook County
Illinois

HALS IL-14
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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Location: 645 South Meacham Road, Schaumburg, Cook County, Illinois

Bounded by South Meacham Road on the west. To the north, south and east the site is bounded by land owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

Latitude: 42.016869, Longitude: -88.043764 (Southwest Corner of the Schweikher House, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The Schweikher-Langsdorf House & Studio Museum landscape is representative of a Midwestern mid-century modern design by a prominent Chicago landscape architect, Franz Lipp. The house and studio designed by architect Paul Schweikher, a contemporary of Mies van der Rohe, fully integrates with Lipp's landscape, demonstrating an aesthetic ideal of mid-century design. The property's second homeowners, Alexander and Martyl Langsdorf, are also significant for their prominence in their respective professions, physics and art. They contributed decades-long stewardship and respect for the house and the property.

Description: The original 7.5-acre property parcel is intact, and under the management of The Village of Schaumburg who operate the House and Studio Museum along with the Schweikher House Preservation Trust. Despite the significant suburban development in the areas adjacent to the property, the long viewsheds from the house and property are largely screened and have qualities similar to the original rural setting.

The property can be divided into two zones: the house zone (2.5 acres) and the perimeter zone (5 acres). The house zone consists of a small covered entry court that extends to an orchard allée beyond the house, a Japanese dry garden, and lawn areas.

Architectural units within the house zone include the house and studio, along with a carport. There is also a detached three-car garage, which is currently being used as an architectural office.

The perimeter zone consists of the original gravel entry drive, a wooded boundary on all sides of the property that includes a small stream, Salt Creek, and a meadow to the west and south of the house. Portions of an original post-and-wire fence that demarcated the boundary still exist.

Some of the original plant materials are extant, including distinctive Austrian pines, the majority of trees in the orchard, an arborvitae hedge that formed the border of the Japanese dry garden, as well as at least one of the black willows for which the house was named, located at the stream's edge. The open areas are maintained as lawns in the house zone and grass meadow in the perimeter area. The cultural landscape shows no clear evidence of major negative disturbances and deterioration by natural or human forces.

Many of the original spatial arrangements and viewsheds across the landscape have been altered due to both overgrowth of original plantings and the addition of hedgerow screens. Initially, the view from the living room was one that looked west over the meadow, creating a vista over the entire property, finally terminating at the western edge along Meacham Road. Currently, a large hedgerow, planted by the second owners, blocks and substantially alters this view, which gives the entire property a more closed-in feeling.

The perimeter plantings have been overrun with invasive trees and vines, which completely enclose the property. This gives it an insular feeling, instead of a sense of seeing beyond the property as was originally intended. Buckthorn, grapevine, and bittersweet have contributed to a density in these plantings, which do a disservice to the original, open feel of the landscape design. Despite this encroachment, which alters the landscape in spatial scale and feel, the original boundary of the property is still fully intact and complete.

The site generally is in good condition. Condition within the House Zone is good with many remaining original plantings, elements and arrangement. The Perimeter Zone is in fair condition. While the land is an open meadow, it is overgrown and in a condition where succession is threatening its character. The borders are overcrowded and dense, causing a less-than-healthy condition. Most existing original plantings are aging with some in fair to poor condition.

History: Architect Paul Schweikher designed and built his mid-century modern home and studio in 1936-1937. The house and site is a local Landmark and currently being maintained in its original condition by the Village of Schaumburg, and operated as a museum by the Schweikher House Preservation Trust. The house is also on the National Register. The area of the original Schweikher site is leased to the Village of Schaumburg by an agreement with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago, which also owns the surrounding land.

History of the House and Site:
In 1936, Paul Schweikher received a 7.5-acre plot of land as partial payment for the redesign of a large barn into a home on a neighboring gentlemen's farm in Roselle (now Schaumburg), Illinois. Schweikher had a fondness for American barns and eventually synthesized this with his other passion,

Japanese architecture. This harmonious blend came to fruition as Schweikher and his wife returned home from a trip to Japan in 1937. Aboard the S.S. Hoover, Schweikher sketched his first concept for Willow House, which would soon become his home and studio, carefully sited on those 7.5 acres he had received the year before.

Schweikher consulted with his colleague, landscape architect, Franz Lipp, to create a simple landscape fully integrated with the home. Although not documented in a drawing, Lipp is associated with the landscape design for the Schweikher House as noted in an oral interview with Schweikher conducted by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1984.

Franz Lipp, originally from Leipzig, Germany, moved to Chicago in 1923 from Boston, where he'd lived and studied for two years at Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, to work for Jens Jensen as a construction supervisor. It is plausible that Lipp interacted with Alfred Caldwell throughout this period, as Caldwell worked for Jensen from 1924 to 1931. Following his time with Jensen, he opened his own office in Chicago in 1929. From approximately 1943 to 1951, Lipp took a sabbatical from his practice to document Yellowstone National Park, as a photographic survey, commissioned by the National Park Service. He spent time over several years capturing each season in the park. Upon completion of this work, his photographs were shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1951 in an exhibition titled "Yellowstone Park: Photographic Survey." Lipp was the recipient of numerous awards for his landscape design work, including two national honors from the American Association of Nurserymen, which were presented to him by First Ladies Lady Bird Johnson (1968) and Patricia Nixon (1971) at the White House. He was also awarded the 1977 Hutchinson Medal from the Chicago Horticultural Society for his life work with particular mention of his design of Cantigny Park and Gardens. In 1980, Lipp received the Distinguished Practice Award from the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He continued his practice in the Chicago area until his retirement in 1981.

Schweikher made additions to the house in 1946, to accommodate a growing family and practice. The house was photographed by Hedrich-Blessing before these alterations and these photos comprise the essential record of the original design. Additions and alterations to both the house and the landscape were added at that time [in 1946].

With Schweikher's departure from the Chicago area to become dean of Yale School of Architecture, the Langsdorf family purchased the Schweikher home and studio from the architect and his wife in 1953.

History of the Second Owners:
The Langsdorfs, Alexander and Martyl, were important figures in their careers

and in society. Alexander worked with Enrico Fermi on the Manhattan Project and petitioned President Truman not to use the atomic bombs during World War II. Martyl was a prominent painter who exhibited in over 100 solo shows and numerous group exhibits. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, and following her death in 2013, an exhibit of her paintings was on display at the Printworks Gallery in Chicago. She also designed the iconic Doomsday Clock for the first edition of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. The Langsdorfs realized and understood the importance of the property they purchased. During their tenure in the home, they made very few changes to the house, carefully keeping the original architectural intent intact.

Landscape Elements:
The home was originally set within a 7.5 acre tract in the rural environment of farm fields. The house was situated on the highest elevation of the tract. After construction of the house, a limited amount of the green space was maintained as mowed lawn while the outlying areas were cultivated as an alfalfa field, conceived by Lipp as an alternative to a rolling lawn, one that is more easily maintained.

While many plantings from the Schweikher era remain intact, through analysis of the site it is clear that the Langsdorf family impacted the characteristic of the original Schweikher house landscape. Fortunately, the Langsdorfs added plantings rather than removed original material. Due to pressure of surrounding development in the community, and the local water management district, the Langsdorfs added a number of evergreen plantings around the perimeters of the house site and the larger site in anticipation of needing to screen the viewsheds. Additional landscape changes during the Langsdorf era include the expansion of a peony bed in the backyard, a vegetable garden that is no longer present, and a gingko tree that roughly stands in the location of an original black willow, from which the house gets its name.

Today, the property includes numerous original landscape elements including an entrance courtyard, a Japanese dry garden, an allée of fruit trees, setpiece Austrian pines, and a backyard patio. The house has not been substantially altered since Schweikher's addition in 1947. Originally, the house was surrounded by approximately 2.5 acres of mowed lawn and the Salt Creek stream edge was marked by a fence line that stands today but is largely overgrown with invasive plants.

The property is accessed off Meacham Road via an original single lane gravel driveway that is still maintained, which leads to a small gravel parking lot and carport. Adjacent to the carport, only one of multiple original setpiece Austrian pines (*Pinus nigra*) remains. These pines are significant because Lipp intentionally cut the leaders resulting in a unique growth habit. This landscape

area visually connects with the entry courtyard defined by the studio, home and carport. Within the courtyard a honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) sits amongst a bed of pachysandra and a hawthorn (*Crataegus*) within a bed of English ivy. To the north of the ivy bed, the land slopes downward to accommodate the 1947 studio addition and a lower level entrance. It is believed that this landform and the hawthorn were planted by Schweikher after the 1947 addition, based on an aerial photograph from 1953.

An entry sequence ends in an orchard allée, consisting of various fruit trees, which extends from the entrance courtyard to the east. This allée remains mostly intact, except for one tree, which was replaced and planted out of alignment. Adjacent to the orchard allée, a massive white pine (*Pinus strobus)* sits southeast of the arborvitae. This tree appears in the 1946 aerial. A peony bed exists along the southern border of the house zone. This planting area existed during the Schweikher era but was significantly expanded by the Langsdorfs, as they hosted society parties related to the blooming of the peonies. The bed is currently planted with peonies and various perennials. Along the eastern boundary of the house zone is a large hedgerow of blue spruce and additional evergreens. From aerial photo examination, it appears that these were planted by the Langsdorfs.

To the north of the driveway, a cluster of three trees exists between the arborvitae hedgerow and the carport to the southeast. These trees include a Chinese elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*), a hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*), and a blue spruce (*Picea pungens*). The Langsdorfs added the hedgerow and only the elm seems to be original to the Schweikher era, as noted in the oral history.

The Japanese dry garden is located southwest of the home and is the focal point of the living room. A small brick-paved patio runs along the edge of the house. The majority of the garden contains raked pebbles. Its southern edge is bounded by a row of large arborvitae. This garden's appearance has changed since the 1946 Hedrich Blessing photos due to maturity and overgrowth of the arborvitaes (*Thuja)* and alteration of the brick patio.

A lawn extends from the Japanese dry garden and is marked by an original horizontal juniper (*Juniperus)*. This lawn area includes an original Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra*) located just south of the garage. Added by the Langsdorfs, a hedgerow of large arborvitae runs north-south approximately 10-15 feet west of the garage edge and continues on the north side of the driveway. Several other trees are located within this area of yard, most of which were added during the Langsdorf era.

The meadow as it exists today mostly maintains the look and feel of the original open alfalfa field. Within the meadow are multiple stands of crabapple that have been overtaken by buckthorn. The meadow is mostly exotic grasses

and perennials and is not a native prairie. Original planted evergreens exist today in the meadow. Just north of its northern boundary, a small stream flows from west to east.

Period of Significance:
The period of significance is defined as the years 1937 to 1953. This time frame begins with the design and construction of the house and site by the architect and landscape architect, includes a set of photographs taken in 1946 by Hedrich-Blessing Photographers, encompasses additions to the house, the studio, and garage/model shop, and ends with the Schweikhers move and sale of the property to the Langsdorf family. Elements of the Langsdorf's ownership of the property should be considered in addition to the period of significance. These include their love of gardening, which most clearly manifested in the expansion of the peony bed and in a large vegetable garden.

Overall the character of the landscape designed by Lipp remains intact. Although the numerous evergreens planted by the Langsdorfs in response to suburban growth disrupt pastoral views both from the house to its meadow and from the property to the surrounding landscape, once in the property, the rural feel originally conceived by Lipp and Schweikher remain.

Sources: Research for the Schweikher-Langsdorf House and Studio landscape was aided by the availability of first hand source materials in the form of historic and period photographs, oral histories, and other documentation. The following source materials and documentation were crucial in the investigation of the Schweikher-Langsdorf House and Studio landscape.

Paul Schweikher:

- 100 Chicago Architects: 1920-1970. Art Institute of Chicago, 1984. Interview of Paul Schweikher by Betty Blum;
- Ownership titles and transfer documents, Cook County Records;
- Hedrick Blessing Photographs (1946), Chicago History Museum and The Schweikher House Preservation Trust;
- Slides, exterior and interior views. (1964-1987), Paul Schweikher House and Studio Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago;
- Google Earth; and
- USGS aerial photographs (1937, 1946, 1952, 1972).

Franz Lipp:

- Cantigny First Division Museum Archives, Franz Lipp Collection;
- Franz Lipp Papers, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago;
- Yellowstone National Park photographic portfolio, Franz Lipp (1897-1996), Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951.;

- Grese, Robert E.. Jens Jensen: Maker Of Natural Parks And Gardens. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. Print.; and
- Domer, Dennis E., eds. Alfred Caldwell: The Life And Work Of A Prairie School Landscape Architect. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.

The Langsdorf Family:

- Sorkin, Michael. Martyl Langsdorf Dies; She designed the Doomsday Clock. St. Louis Post-Dispatch. 06 April 2013. http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/obituaries/martyl-langsdorf-dies-she-designed-the-doomsday-clock/article_b4127781-4e36-556e-a4a7-0abe57d1db73.html
- Kates Giangrasse, Joan. Martyl Langsdorf: 1917-2013. Artist who designed the Doomsday Clock. The Chicago Tribune. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-04-09/news/ct-met-langsdorf-obit-20130409_1_louis-atomic-scientists-kennette-benedict
- Stout, David. Alexander Langsdorf, 83, Plutonium Pioneer. The New York Times. 26 May 1996. http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/26/us/alexander-langsdorf-83-plutonium-pioneer.html
- Yardley, William. Marytl Langsdorf, Doomsday Clock Designer, Dies at 96. The New York Times. 10 April 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/us/martyl-langsdorf-artist-behind-doomsday-clock-dies-at-96.html?_r=0

National Register Nomination:

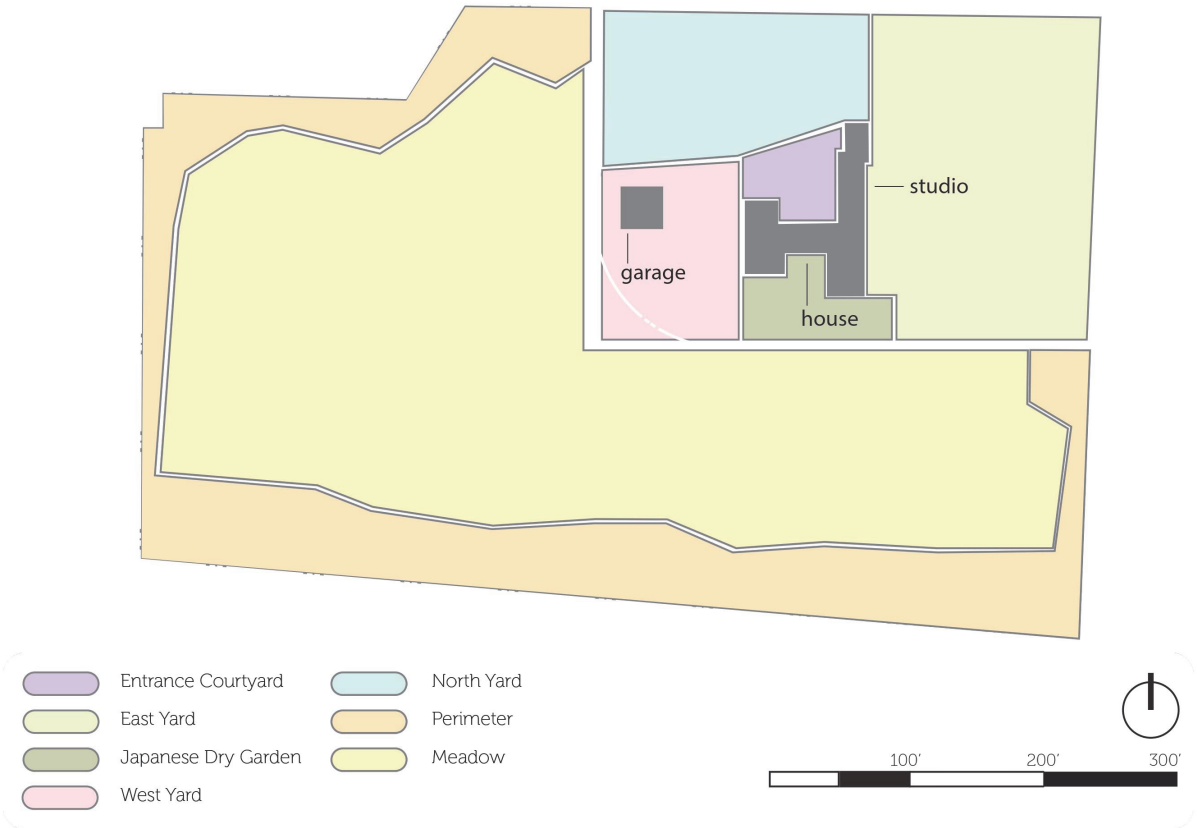
- 1987 National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form by Susan Benjamin, October 10, 1986.

Historian: Researched and compiled by a group of Master of Landscape Architecture students from Illinois Institute of Technology, this Short From is based on a Cultural Landscape Report prepared under the guidance of Professor Carol Yetken for LA 516 Historic Landscape Preservation.

Students: Andrew D'Arcy, Sarah Hanson, Heidi Petersen, Brett Harris, and Peihao Tong

July 28, 2015

Entry 2015 HALS Challenge: Documenting Modernist Landscapes



The Schweikher-Langsdorf House Property Zone diagram illustrates the various regions of the property discussed in this HALS report. This diagram is based on a 2014 Google Earth image (Brett Harris, November 2014).

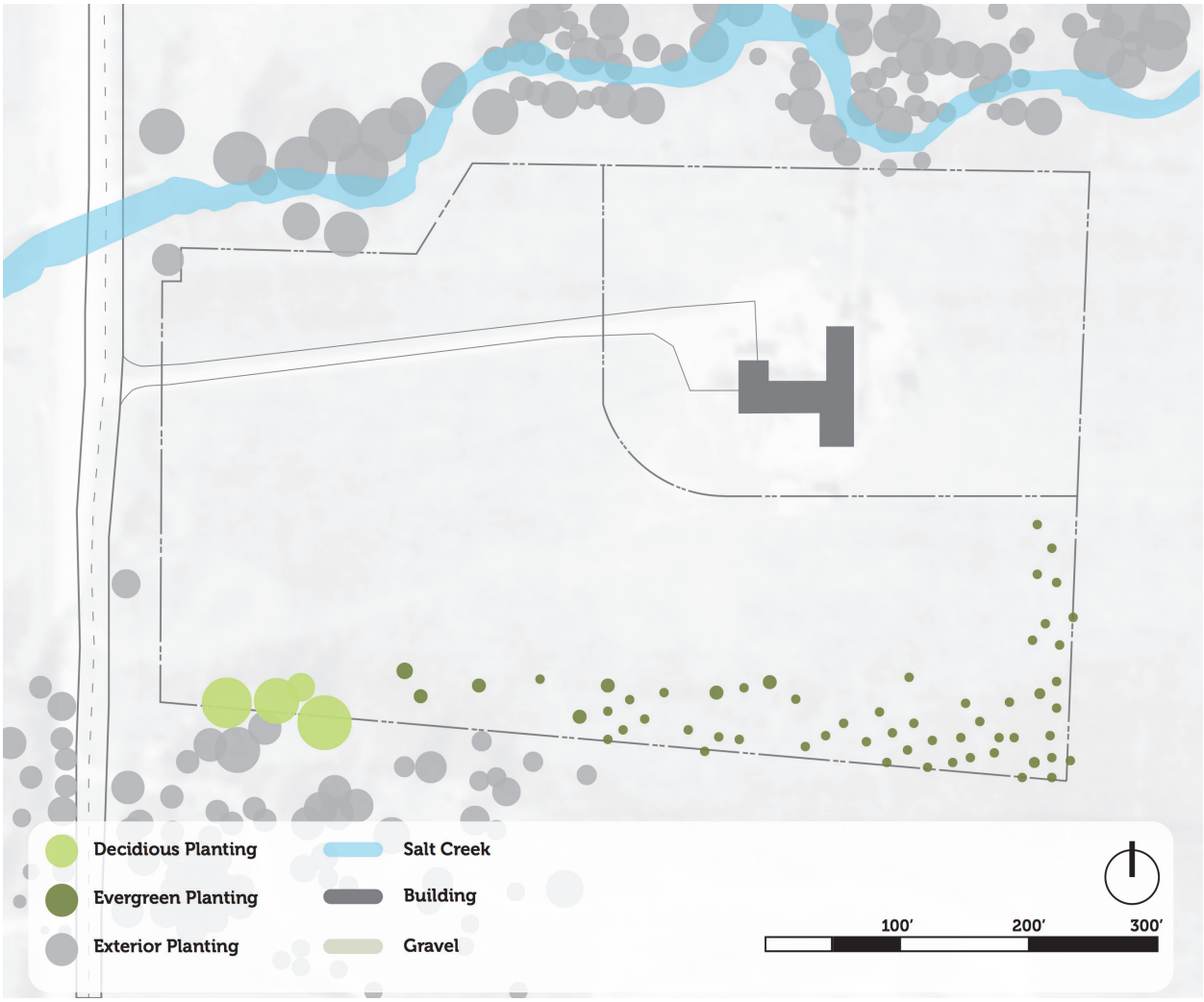


Diagram illustrates the original plantings along with the house and studio as they were in 1937. This diagram is based on a 1937 USGS aerial. (Brett Harris, November 2014).

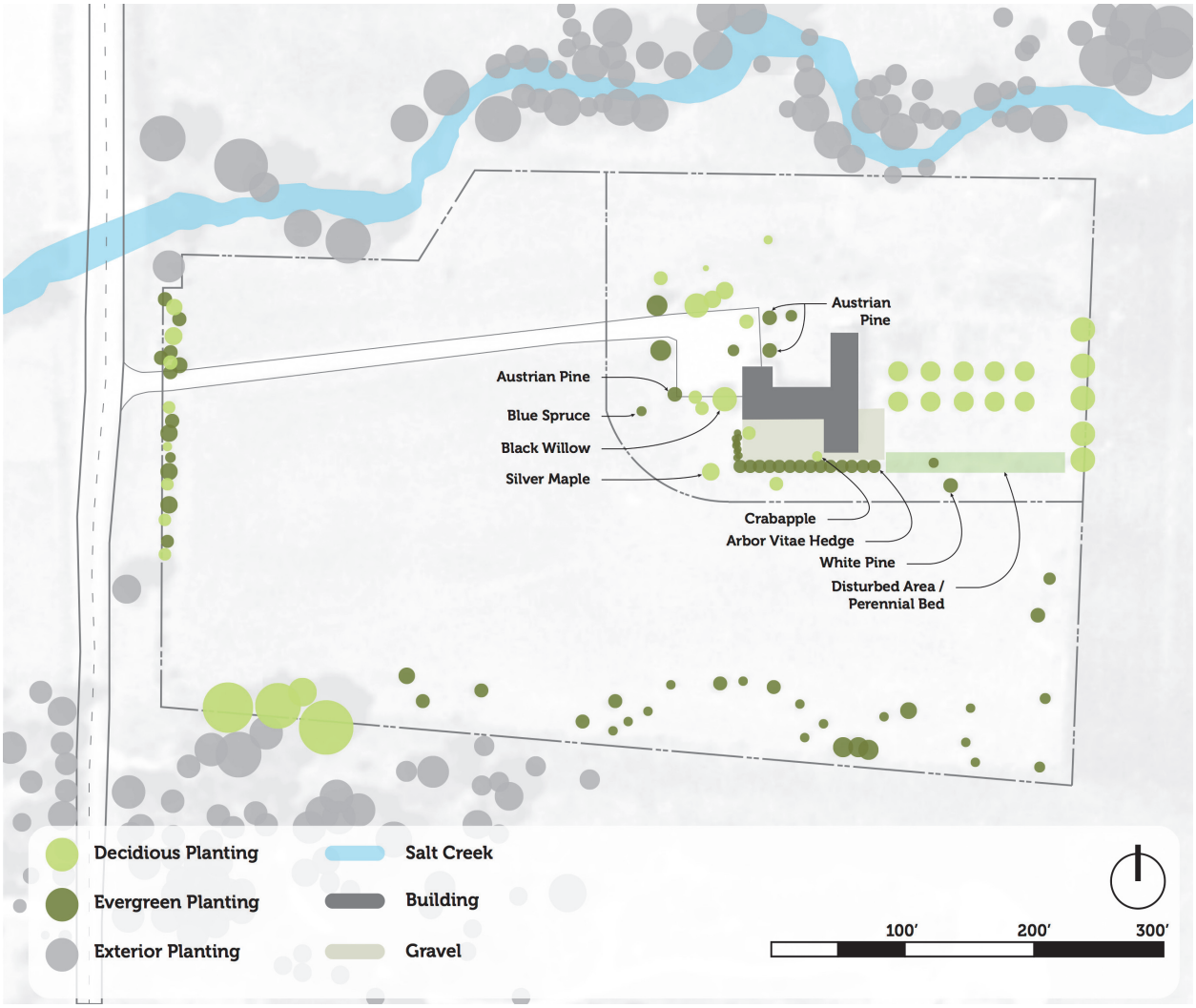


Diagram illustrates the plantings added for the time period after 1937, along with the house and studio as they were in 1946, the same year as the Hedrich-Blessing photographs. This diagram is based on a 1946 USGS aerial. (Brett Harris, November 2014).

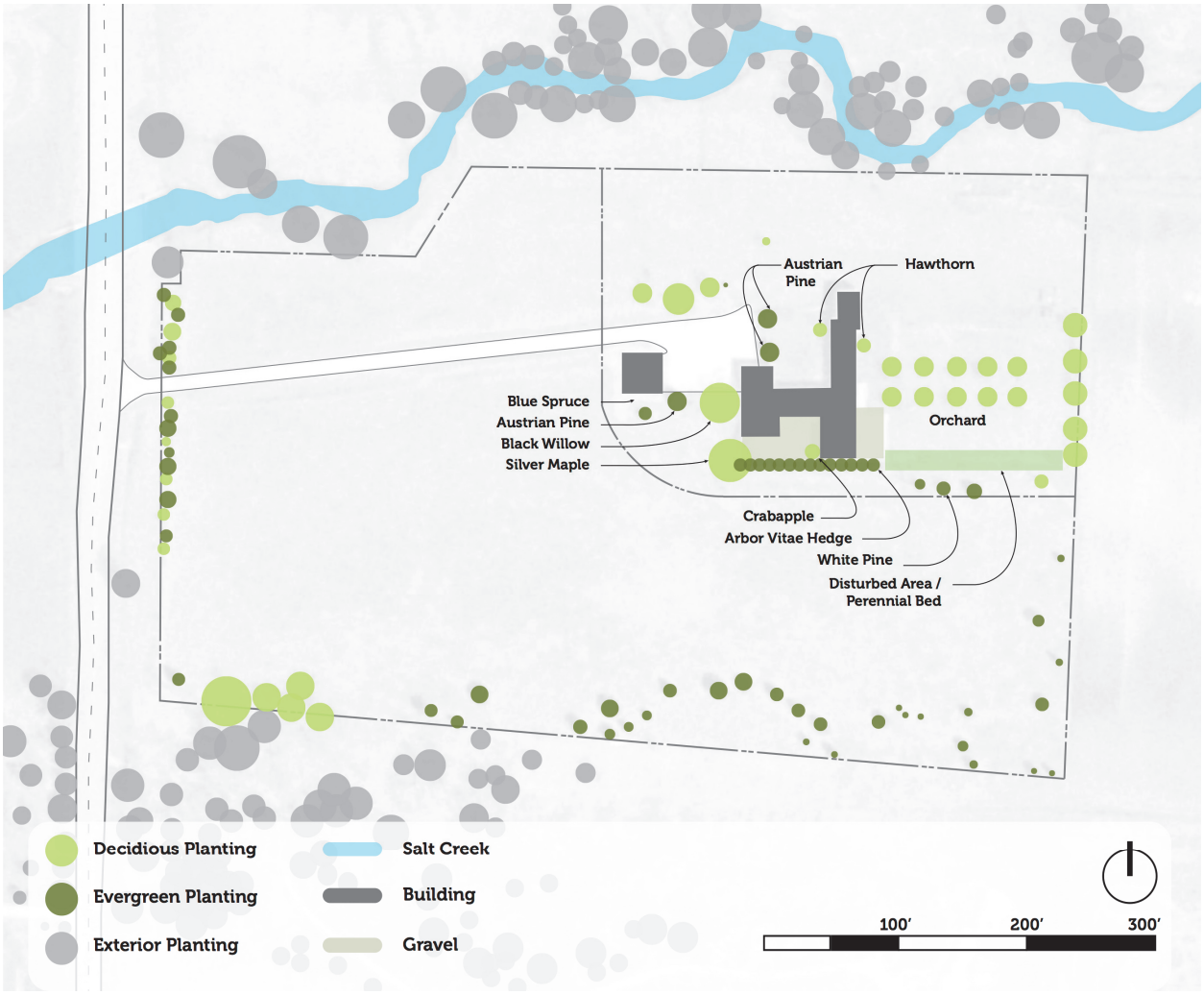
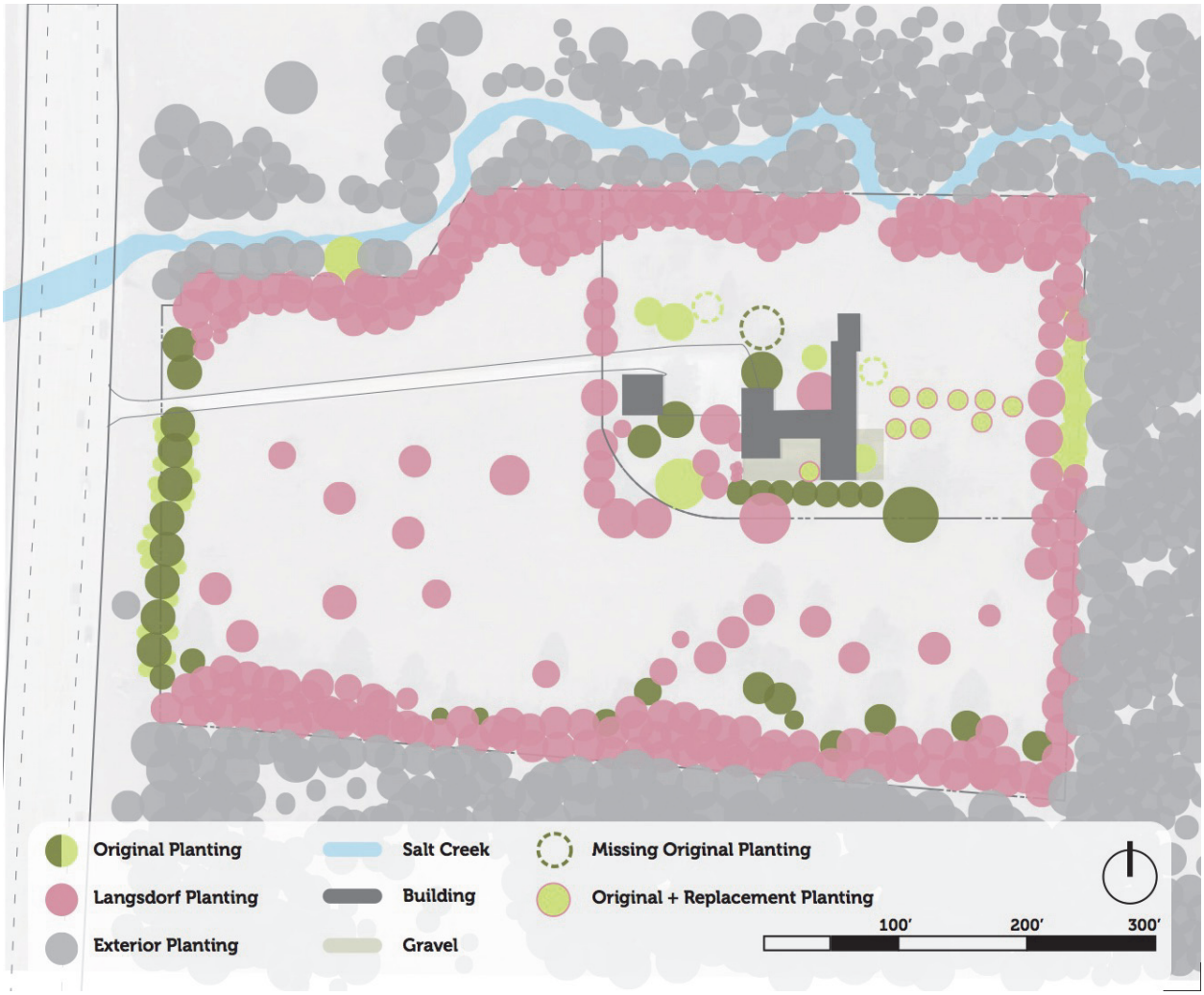


Diagram illustrates the additional plantings and shows the additions to both the house and studio, which took place in 1947. 1953 is the same year the Langsdorfs purchased the house and studio from the Schweikhers. This diagram is based on a 1953 USGS aerial. (Brett Harris, November 2014).



The Schweikher-Langsdorf House Comparative Planting diagram illustrates the various plant material introduced during the tenure of the two homeowners. This diagram is based on a 1953 USGS aerial. (Brett Harris, November 2014).

Viewpoint looking southeast from Salt Creek to the house, carport and studio. Today, the black willow and many of the setpiece Austrian pines are no longer present. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking southwest from the backyard to the house and studio. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum that shows the building before the studio addition was constructed. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking east at the entrance courtyard. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking northeast to the house and Japanese Dry Garden. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking east at the Japanese Dry Garden. Today, significant plant growth encloses the garden. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking northwest at the Japanese Dry Garden and patio. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum that shows the house prior to the bedroom addtion. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).

Viewpoint looking from the house out to the Japanese Dry Garden and patio. Today, the arborvitae have grown to significant height and width, which greatly alters the feeling of the space based on the historic image. This photograph is shot from the same vantage point as a 1946 Hedrich-Blessing photograph in the Chicago History Museum. (Peihao Tong, October 2014).