An Architect in the Audience
A review of the LAB Sessions 1 & 2 and a preview of Sessions 3 & 4

By Stephanie Wascha, AIA

Two down and two to go. Pacific Bonsai Museum, three premier artists in the American bonsai community, and a core group of dedicated enthusiasts, have finished two sessions of a two-year long, four-part event called the LAB (Living Art of Bonsai). The project is intended to stimulate innovation in bonsai and frame this ancient art form as a critical practice deserving formal critique as has developed around painting, sculpture, architecture, and the like.

Not only is this critique practice new to the world of bonsai, but the LAB has also flipped on its head the natural order of how bonsai are typically created. Historically, the tree is styled first. A pot is then found to fit the tree’s aesthetic, scale, and color palette, and ultimately the stand comes into play last, once the first two are deemed complete. The group is reevaluating and questioning every aspect of bonsai and challenging the artists to wander down a path not yet travelled to see how the art form unfolds if the artists are allowed to respond to each other in a different sequence ... and they are doing it all live, in front of an audience.

If you missed the first two LAB events, Aarin Packard, Pacific Bonsai Museum Curator, orchestrates each event to ensure the growing audience has a clear understanding of this tic-tac-toe process to date and what is yet to come. He peppers the artists with questions to help guide the audience through their process and expose them to the nuances of everything from horticulture to architecture. You might consider him the 4th Musketeer or the marriage counselor for the three lively artists who have worked closely together for years. The stands will be produced by standmaker Austin Heitzman. Ceramic artist Ron Lang will be creating the vessels in which the trees will be placed. Both specialize in working with bonsai in their respective fields, and Ryan Neil is the resident bonsai artist.

For the LAB, the artists have been invited to experiment with the traditional process using architectural sites (the event venues) as the initial inspiration for their forms. In Katherine Wimble Fox’s article, “Everyday Reverence: Architecture, Bonsai, and the LAB.” Journal of the American Bonsai Society 52, no. 4 (2018):18-24, she reviewed the evolu-
tion of the tokonoma – small alcoves within a traditional Japanese home to display cherished objects, and explained how they led to the inclusion of architectural design in the LAB project. Inspired by the idea of the tokonoma influencing the creation of bonsai, Aarin wanted to see how each home (or site) would influence the creation of the tree/pot/stand collaboration. What better way to do that than highlighting amazing homes that track modernism in the Pacific Northwest by using them as venues for the LAB events?

Not only do the LAB artists explain how the sites affect their work, but the Pacific Bonsai Museum is taking it one step further, providing specialists to educate the audience about the architecture and architects of each venue. Dr. Kevin Nute, Professor of Architecture at the University of Oregon and expert in the influence of Japanese culture on Frank Lloyd Wright designs, gave a great lecture to help celebrate the first venue: The Chauncey L. and Johanna Griggs House near Tacoma, WA designed by Wright. (Figures 1, 2, 3, & 4) In his lecture he explained how Wright borrowed inspiration from Japan for his “All-American Aesthetic.” He shared geometric prints and paintings that inspired Wright to create organic floor plans and patterned “art glass.” Wright’s mammoth overhangs at the house proved to influence all three artists in very different and unique ways and having a private lecture from one of the country’s most famous architects helped the audience appreciate that influence even more. It was quite a treat.

In Session Two, a tour of the house and grounds of the Wollochet House (Figures 6 & 7) designed by Mary Lund Davis in Gig Harbor, WA was guided by none other than the architect’s own grandson, Nev Granum. (Figure 5) The audience was able to share in the inspiration behind the structure and the personal family history passed down from Mary herself. She was the first woman in Washington to become a licensed architect following WWII after studying at the University of Washington under Lionel Pries, and was a role model for women in the industry for her entire career.

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Granum described her as a savior of trees on the grounds that used to hold a brick yard and apple orchard before it was transformed into the magnificent grounds visible today. He shared a touching story of his grandmother rescuing an old Japanese Maple left for dead as stow-away on a navy ship’s return voyage from Japan decades earlier, and how it has since been catalogued by the Smithsonian as being one of the oldest maples in the country. “She paid twenty dollars for it,” he chuckled as the audience stood and gaped at it. In her design of the home, she utilized a triangular grid pattern as the basis for her inspiration. The large overhangs were used to frame views of nature. She played with high and low ceiling planes to create more public and intimate spaces. Even the adjoining deck boards were cut at the required sixty-degree angle to avoid box-like ninety degree angles, because, as Mary’s daughter Kit recalled her mom saying frequently, paraphrasing Frank Lloyd Wright: “The human spirit is best when not boxed in.” Event goers will be pleased to hear that the venue for the third session will be the Fauntleroy House by architect George Suyama, FAIA, with Seattle firm Suyama Peterson Deguchi. This structure is slightly more contemporary and minimalist than the preceding two but similarly strives to bring the outside in with use of interior/exterior courtyards, and the breathtaking framed views of the Puget Sound and Cascade mountains. Just being in these amazing and otherwise inaccessible homes is a wonderful addition to this exceptional event.

A Recap

Events of Session One:

- The unveiling of Ron’s site-inspired pot to be used to influence a stand and tree collaboration in future sessions
- The unveiling of Austin’s site-inspired stand to be used to influence a pot and tree collaboration in future sessions
- The live-audience styling of the first site-inspired tree to be used to influence a stand and pot collaboration in future sessions
In Session One, both Ron and Austin unveiled their first pieces, setting this new bonsai process into motion. (Figure 9) Ron explained how his pot was inspired by the mammoth cantilevered architectural roof planes and central fireplace hearth found in The Griggs House. He reminded the audience that the three pieces from Session One would never come together to form a whole, but instead, would be the impetus for the three-separate tree/pot/stand collaborations that would result from this experiment in two-years’ time. (See Figure 8 for details.)

Austin’s inspiration came less from the physical structure and more from how the light interacted with the house during his first site visit. He likened his vertical, arching, walnut plain to a tree on a cliff in desperate search of light, similar to how the interior spaces of the home grasped for the scarce, winter sun blocked by the large overhangs. He was also resolved to push the boundaries of his stand in a way that would ultimately take advantage of his piece being the design influencer in this tree/pot/stand sequence instead of last in line, as it historically would be:

“I wanted to take away the horizontal platform for the pot. Your typical stand has a flat surface, and a pot goes on it. If I make a horizontal surface, then you can put any old pot on it, which wouldn’t be true to the collaboration.”

“To hell with gravity; to hell with physics,” joked Ron, wondering how he was going to attach some sort of pot to this vertical slice of wood in Session Two.

After the first site-inspired pot and stands were unveiled, it was Ryan’s turn to create a site-inspired bonsai right there while the audience looked on. (Figure 10) You don’t have to be a horticulture genius or bonsai expert to enjoy this process. Ryan is very skilled at explaining all things tree related in a way a novice could understand it and an expert could learn something.
He surprised the audience with his preferred orientation of the tree, but defended his decision with a molecular discussion of how limber pines have a propensity to relax and lay flat once they warm up in the sun, and how that particular orientation would suit both the tree and his vision for the styling.

The audience was left wondering what the three artists would come up with for next steps in Session Two at the Mary Lund Davis House in Gig Harbor, and they weren’t disappointed.

Similar to Frank Lloyd Wright, Mary Lund Davis was inspired by Japanese architecture, culture, and design. She, too, designed to bring the outside in, played with architectural planes, and actually learned the art of bonsai while she was traveling. It was the perfect venue for Session Two.

**Events of Session Two:**
- The unveiling of Ron’s ceramic responses to Austin’s first stand and Ryan’s first tree.
- The unveiling of Austin’s stand for Ron’s first pot. (Figures 11 & 13)
- Ryan repotting the tree he styled in Session One in Ron’s new pot designed for Session Two.

Session Two began with Austin pushing the boundaries a second time by questioning why stands are typically only for temporary use. Most bonsai trees naturally prefer outdoor living and are like a fish out of water when brought indoors and placed on a furniture-like stand for a brief showing. Using architectural materials as inspiration, he did a little, “light construction,” and created a stand sheathed in copper to better withstand the elements, making it possible for the stand to join the pot and tree outdoors long term. Instead of an unchanging furniture-like stand, he wanted his stand to age gracefully and patina over time. The shape and angles were borrowed directly from Ron’s first Wright-inspired pot, and even though they were hand made in different states, he impressively nailed the abstract angles to match perfectly.

Austin’s material of choice is normally wood, but taking the group’s challenge head-on, borrowed the use of copper from the Griggs House where it was being used for the roof and...
gutters. Later he explained that he would continue to test out new materials in Session Three where his stand would start off as wood but end in another medium. That is the only hint he would disclose. All the various pieces are currently on display at the Pacific Bonsai Museum and definitely worth seeing in person.

Ron, having been a ceramics professor for decades and gaining joy from bending others’ perceptions of things, equated Austin’s first vertical walnut stand to a site and posed the question to the audience, “What kind of site is this stand?” In 2002, Ron curated a ceramic show where he invited artists to create “spaces” for bonsai trees. He provided a brief slideshow of some of his favorites from that event, so the audience could better assimilate how a pot could create a space, or site, for a tree, and how that related to the architectural spaces in which the events were taking place. Austin’s first organically shaped stand reminded Ron of rock formations similar to cliff dwellings found in Mesa Verde, and he wanted to complement that shape with abstracted geometries found in the two amazing homes. Once unveiled, Ron’s pot wasn’t sitting on Austin’s first stand (Austin made sure there were no horizontal surfaces) but hanging from it. (Figure 12) This begged the question of how to water the tree without soaking the walnut stand below. Ron and Austin jointly reveled in posing this difficult question to Ryan, but their enjoyment was short lived.

“That’s it! I know what I’m going to do. Mesa Verde. I love it. I have no idea what I’m going to do for the other one yet, but I know exactly what I’m going to do for this one,” Ryan explained with growing enthusiasm. Something about Ron’s Mesa Verde reference inspired his decision about tree species for Session Three. When asked for a hint after the fact, all he would divulge was that it would be a species not yet seen as a bonsai, exclaiming, “You will have to wait and see!”

It was time for Ryan to re-pot his tree from Session One in Ron’s new pot. Ron, however, made two pots instead of one to promote a conversation about style. (Figure 14) Professor Ron asked the audience which pot should be used for Ryan’s tree and why. One guest compared the two pots stating, “One...
is a tuxedo, and the other is like blue jeans,” which accurately depicted the refined surface decoration and gold luster of the first against the ripped rough edges and bulky shape of the second. Austin and Ryan were doing the heavy lifting, moving the tree into varying positions for Ron to assess how it was to sit in his pots. He gave a smirk after suggesting they rotate it again and again, playfully amusing himself in their struggle. After the audience was given an opportunity to compare and contrast the two pieces, the tuxedo (resembling a Japanese Drum Pot and inspired by the upward motion of the tree) was ultimately the winner. Smirking again, Ron suggested the tree should “float” inside the pot. Ryan was up to bat and determined not to disappoint. (Figures 15 & 16)

“Repotting is a crap shoot. That’s why people never re-pot in front of an audience,” Ryan said half-jokingly as he prepared to do exactly that. Without further ado, out came the reciprocating Sawzall. He began sawing away at the wooden box housing the tree’s fragile root system right there in the middle of the pristine Mary Lund Davis living room. The audience was given a crash course in advanced potting techniques ... starting with the aesthetics and “visual weight” requiring that the tree be elevated (or “floating,” as Ron requested) to gain extra shape and contours, and ending with technical information on the particle size of the soil and ways to avoid mashing the sensitive roots which would eventually kill the tree. The tree was held up by Aarin in the desired “floating” location while Ryan circled around and around, propping sections up with wood and tying things down with wires. He carefully placed soil in the pot and prodded it down into the roots without skewering it to death. The audience watched intently, wondering how this large, beautiful tree jutting out of the gilded pot (only being held in place by some props and wires) would eventually be able to stand on its own. (Figure 17) Ryan stood back and casually began talking to the audience, and as if he’d forgotten Aarin was still clinging to the tree in hopes of preventing its toppling, said smiling, “Oh, you can let go now.” Aarin stepped back away from the tree and voila! The finished bonsai stood solidly while the audience clapped.
Aarin wrapped up the event by recapping the process and reminding the enthusiastic audience of the two remaining sessions.

A Preview

Events of Session Three
August 17, 2019; Fauntleroy House designed by Seattle architects Suyama Peterson Deguchi:
- The three compositions will be placed throughout the home as a series of mini exhibitions.
- Participants will engage in a discussion of the two, new bonsai designed by Ryan.
- Interdisciplinary design professionals will contribute to the critique of the compositions and how each bonsai’s immediate architectural environment influences its presentation.

Design critique will be the major focus of Session 3. Pacific Bonsai Museum sounded their horns in the 2018 Bonsai Focus article “The Call for Bonsai Art Criticism,” encouraging their readers join in the dialogue, looking to established practices in other artistic disciplines for inspiration. Painters, for example, question and defend every tiny aspect of their work as part of the age-old process of learning one’s craft. When designing a building, it isn’t uncommon for a team of architects and designers to participate in design charrettes. They co-produce sketches, models, 3D drawings, and deliberate and defend their process, while the building is gradually defined over time. The LAB artists are passionate about incorporating a similar process of discussion and critique into the art of bonsai, and the LAB project is setting the precedent.

Events of Session Four
Spring 2020, location TBD:
- Reveal of Austin’s stand for the tree/pot combination from Session Two.
- Reveal of Ryan’s potted bonsai from Session Three.
- Final reveal of all three completed combinations.
- Discussion and critique of the role of the stand and bonsai display.

Check the Pacific Bonsai Museum’s website for details on Sessions Three and Four as they are announced.