

1-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Hester, Randolf T. Jr. (1988) "Narrative Landscape," *Oz*: Vol. 10. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1154>

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Narrative Landscape

Randolph T. Hester, Jr.

In addition to its utility, beauty, cleverness and cultural record, the design of the public landscape describes relationships of society to the natural environment and vice versa. The designed public landscape also expresses a dream, the embodiment of a vision of what society might be as well as what it is. How society relates to the earth and the dreams the society keeps create a drama that begins in public debate and that reaches formal resolution in the landscape. As with most landscape architects, my work addresses those civic issues, and in so doing produces a narrative, simply conceived, difficult to effect, and elusive to comprehend.

The novel writ in the public landscape bears little in common with the obscure narrative that is often private, inside humor at public expense, so popular in design circles today. Part of the difference is expressed in the conflict between the architects in *The Fountainhead* and *A Cry of Angels*. In contrast to Ayn Rand's architect, Jayell Crooms had a civic vision, not a selfish one. And he effected the vision. Similar to the drama in Jeff Field's novel, the story of the civic landscape is written by many novelists, with multiple and often contradictory intents.

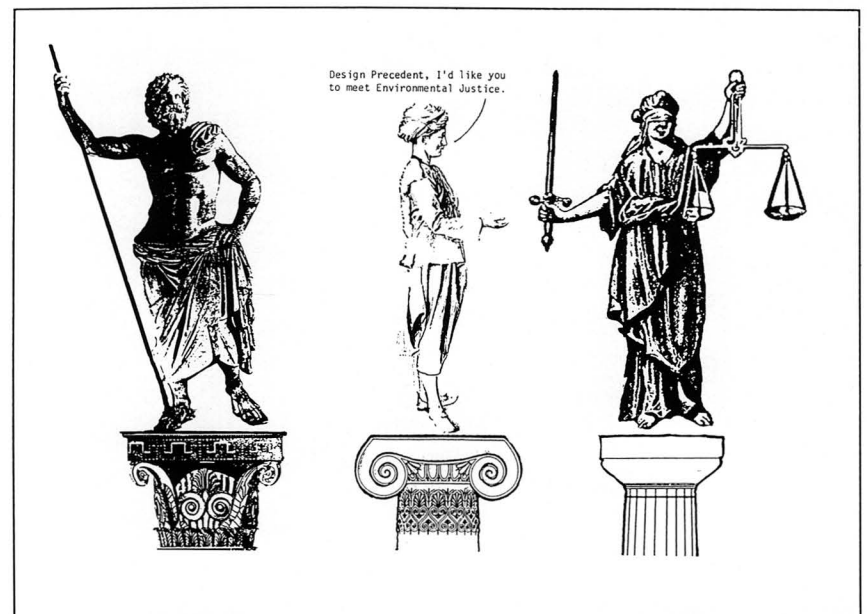
The story is set in a democratic political and advanced capitalistic economic context. The related public debate centers on two wicked problems: societal alienation from the environment mother earth, and segregation of the society into two

classes. The protagonists are Connectedness, who struggles against environmental alienation and anomie, and Equality, who battles environmental injustices in a gentle class war. The functionaries of Connectedness and Equality are Participation and Advocacy. The signatures of all four are left on the landscapes they touch.

Connectedness

The assumption that nature is good for people has been the powerful although largely untested motivator for the provision of recreation areas and urban open space. It seems to have been good for the middle class; it has soothed their collective nerves. But more. Grounded in both reformist and social control ideologies, open space has often been called upon to be the healer of social ills and coolant of hot heads when the discontent of the lower class threatened disruption. The narrative of much historical and present American landscape design speaks of these social control mechanisms.

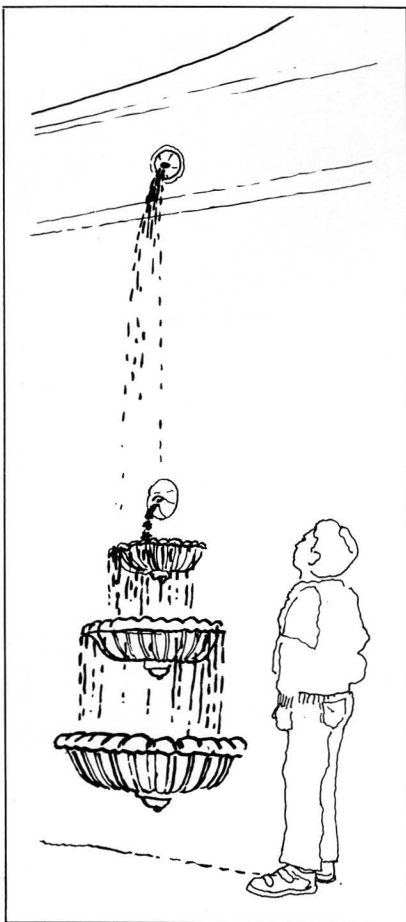
Today, many landscape architects couch their role in a desire to help reverse society's destructive relationship to nature. Many of our projects seek to connect people more directly and lovingly to their natural habitat. Traditionally the provision of natural open space as national parks, woodlots or stream greenways helped connect people to the landscapes they inhabited. Urban forests,



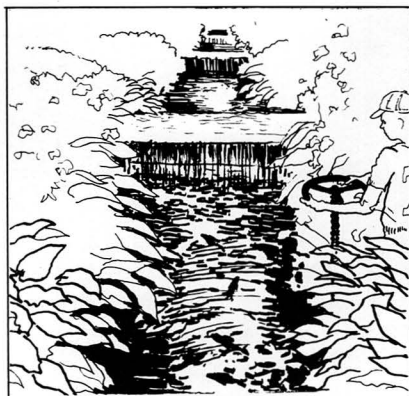
Comfortable Landscape



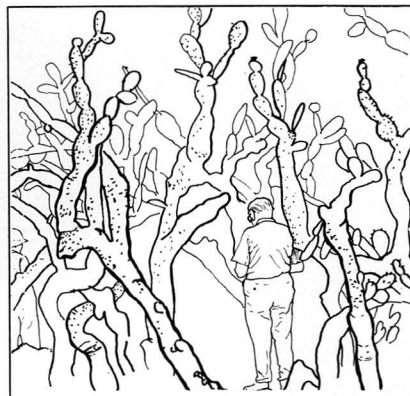
Shocking Landscape



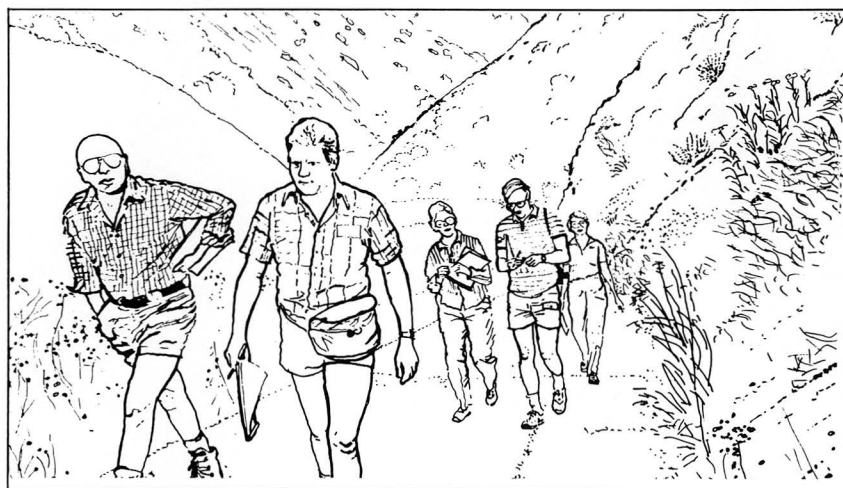
"The Rainwater Fountains"



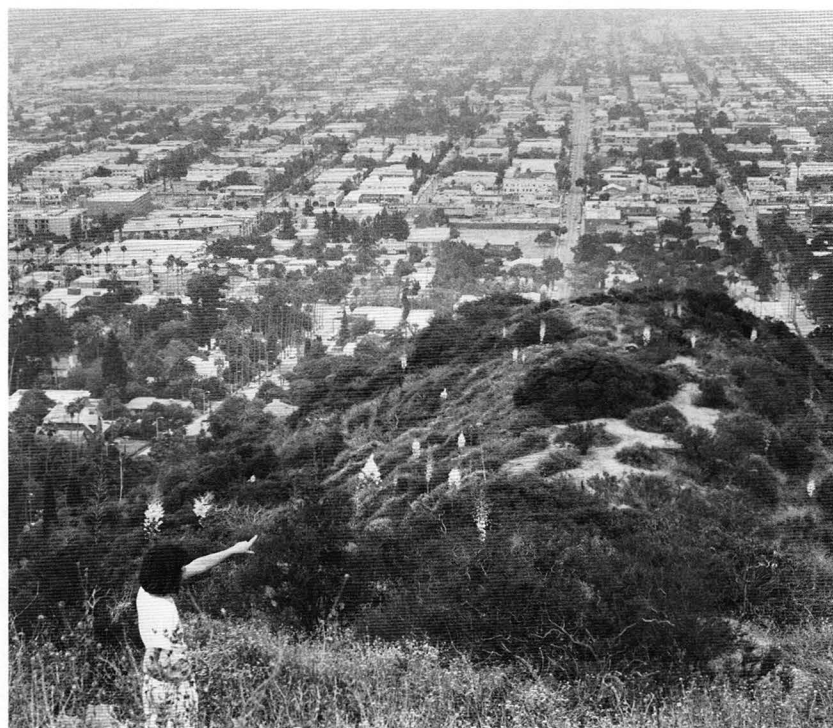
"Water Diversion Sculpture"



"The Cactus House"



"Ephemeral Fire Walk"



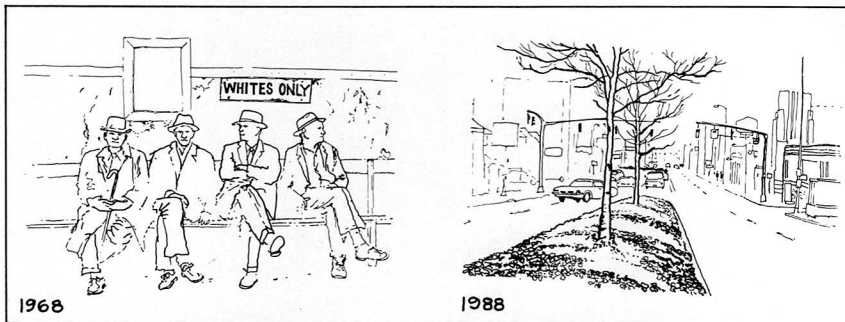
Runyon Canyon

community gardens, housing densification, farm land preservation and wilderness areas follow this understated tradition whereby the goal is to provide both recreation and the psychological benefit of connectedness to the natural environment. Our plan for Runyon Canyon, an urban wilderness in Hollywood, California, typifies projects whose intent is reconnecting people to their surrounding landscape. People are invited into a wild chaparral landscape in the middle of metropolitan Los Angeles, first through familiar "tamed" botanical gardens and interpretive features, then through adventure trails that lead to isolated naturalness. Suddenly, although subtly different on each trail, the visitor turns a thick, natural corner on a path formed by Lemonade Berry (*Rhus integrifolia*) and Greasewood Chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*) and is directed toward a juxtaposition of the now-rare, native, hot, xeric landscape and the city created from what was once that

landscape. Aside from these views which are both beautiful and tense with counterpoint, the adventure trails are comfortable, relaxing introductions to the natural geology, flora, and fauna. The story is spoken in a whisper with phainopepla, intermittent streams, and buckwheat saying a gentle "hello" to homo sapiens who often view the chaparral as an alien environment. This represents open space design as a passive provider of comforting if simple-minded connectedness with the natural environment.

Many landscape designers have become impatient with that passive approach of simply providing natural open space to tell a story that is too subtle to have much impact. Amid such subtlety, visitors come and go without ever thinking of the natural environment as anything more than, at worst, an alien to be conquered or, at best, a superficial pleasure. Natural processes of water and oxygen cycles and energy exchange, all vital to our urban life and our very survival, can be too readily ignored when the story is the only *natural* process that affects their lives. We feel that environmental anomie is life-on-earth threatening and that reconnecting people to the natural environment must be more forcefully effected. Much of this narrative intends to dramatically draw attention to unhealthy environmental alienation.

Along these lines, one of my experiments is to develop intensive agriculture while maintaining a dense urban neighborhood that can challenge accepted lifestyles. I have produced significant food crops of chickens, ducks, geese, rabbits, goats, fruits and vegetables by utilizing almost every side and backyard open space within the framework of twenty single-family detached units to the acre. While not approaching self-sufficiency, the use of backyard prime agricultural land, even if in only 2-by 10-foot parcels, does reduce food cost and has an important impact in reconnecting urbanites (most dramatically children) to long-ignored natural processes like microclimate, nitrogen cycles and hydrology. Equally important, the experiment provides a



Separated Public Facilities vs. Separated Public Landscaping

powerful model, an alternative way to live more densely, that challenges head-on low density suburbs. There is little waste of limited resources, but with compacted suburban advantages of single family houses dense enough to support mass transit. Picture twenty single family detached units with agriculture. Shocking! "It can't be done," you say. Check it out, but be prepared for your status-ful quarter-acre lot to take a beating.

We see catastrophic pollution and abuse of land partly as the result of stupidity arising from environmental alienation, therefore environmental alienation must be dramatized in the design of the landscape. In Runyon Canyon we tried to make the natural processes talk loudly. For example, rather than hiding drain pipes and catch basins, we designed them to draw attention to the flow of water through the site: oversized, brightly colored, richly textured and strategically located. When rain water runs off the roofs of buildings it enlivens decorative fountains. Acid rain slowly deteriorates the fountains. In case the message is still too subtle, there is a drama written to be read in a shrill scream. Areas previously too steeply graded are regraded with earth to cover uses inappropriately sited. A tennis court created in an earlier plan by making a vertical cut in a hillside is partially covered by pushing the vertical cut back to its natural repose. Hillside boulders make the court unplayable, dramatizing the hurt that the natural canyon, mother earth, has felt for years. The stones teach another lesson. The naturally occurring boulders are large, smooth, river rock, deposited at a lower elevation and heaved upward by geologic forces. Painted blue,

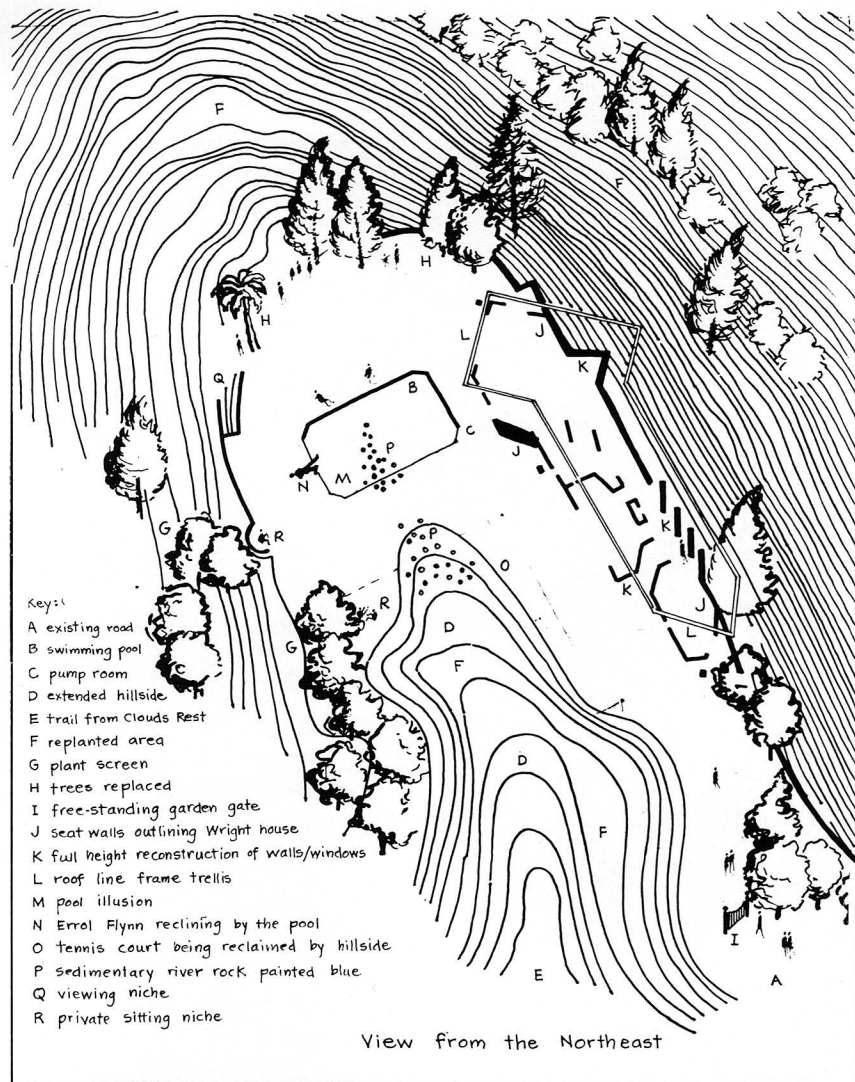
they draw attention to their unstable geological history.

More important than the designer's intended narrative is the fact that the landscape itself creates its own discussion. Because the landscape is alive, it talks back. In California, it shakes uncontrollably at times, opening earth wounds and toppling buildings built on sand. It belches volcanic ash when it becomes sick from abuse. It grows differently than expected or dies before its architectural time. It is this particular aspect of the living landscape, that makes it compelling and enriches its narrative.

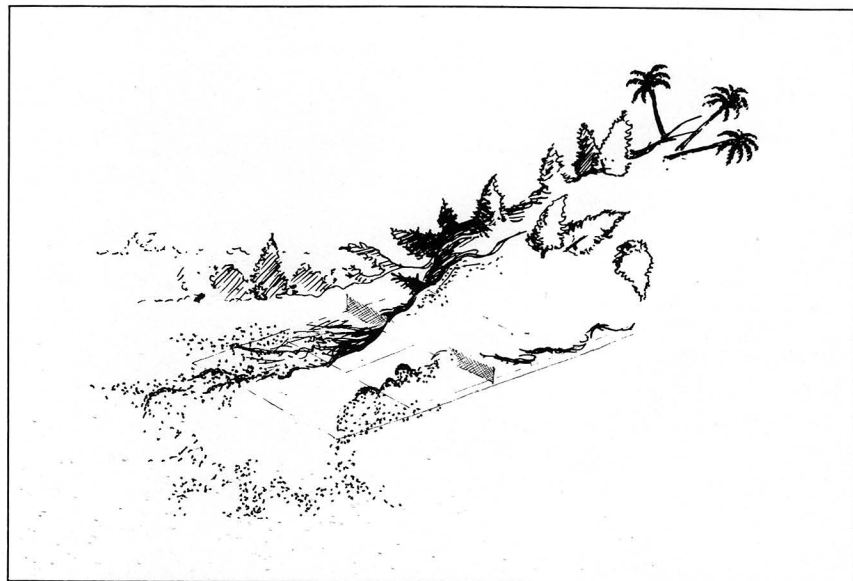
Environmental Justice

The landscape embodies and reflects society's distribution of and access to environmental resources. Although many of these decisions are removed from the practice of landscape architecture, some landscape architects embrace the most important public issues of their time. Just as the architect Jayell Crooms in *A Cry of Angels*, they do battle with the design fiduciaries of forces that profit from oppression of people and place. The struggle for environmental justice is certainly the unpopular public narrative of our age, and I see my work as part of that inelegant story.

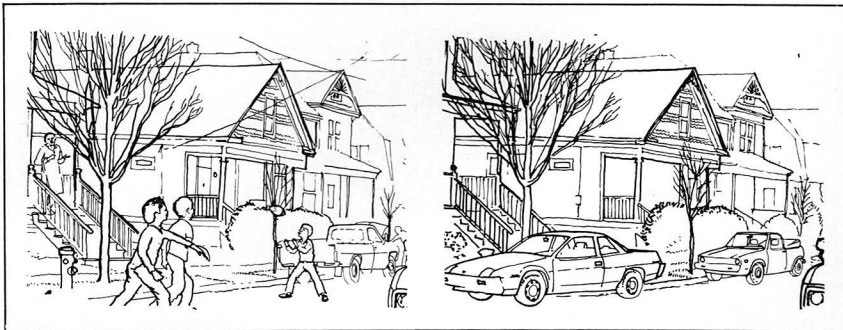
In 1968, urban renewal threatened to destroy the black Chavis Heights neighborhood in Raleigh, North Carolina. Don Collins and I worked with neighborhood leaders to create an alternative plan to prevent the urban renewal clearance, to encourage social improvements, and to maintain the unique



Mother Natures Revenge



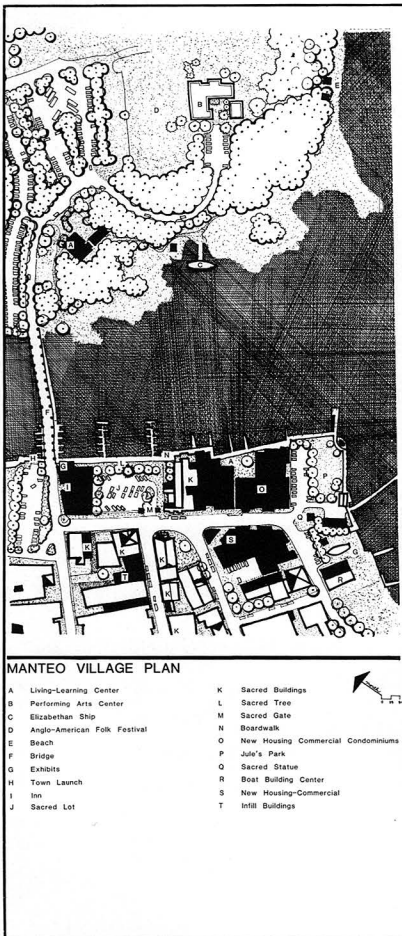
Nature Reclaims the Tennis Court



Rehabilitation vs. Gentrification



Street Protests to Street Shaping



Site Plan

physical character of the community. I moved into the ghetto neighborhood. We engaged residents in a hopeful and eventually successful protest against clearance. Then we focused on a preservation plan that maintained the positive social patterns unique to the southern black ghetto, shotgun houses on narrow lots on narrow streets where front porches provided a block-long living room and a sense of sharing I had never seen in white middle-class neighborhoods.



Water Interaction



Places to Meet



History Lessons

Within the plan we attended to social needs like care services, job creation and training, and housing rehabilitation. Having worked eight years implementing the plan, I ran and was elected to the City Council where I directed major public and private investment into the neighborhood. The narrative in Chavis Heights had little clever art, although many beautiful scenes. There were moments of Nate Shaw heroism and tragedy. My neighbor was dragged from

his bedroom by the city police and beaten for a crime he could not have committed. I was never brutalized, because I was white; I was only harassed by the police because I lived in the black ghetto. The dialogue was not for other designers but was a straightforward story between the community and me. It is a long story, with an interesting geometry written in public debate, the minutes regarding city budgets, a freeway defeated, a new community center, rehabilitated housing, jobs, and an enhanced sense of individual worth and community pride. The narrative is difficult to read from the outside, even when finished; on the surface, it is quite easy to confuse with a gentrified neighborhood.

For two decades I have worked with communities to overcome environmental injustices: in Cambridge, Massachusetts with low income groups to stop the Inner Belt Freeway from destroying their homes and neighborhoods and then to achieve a fair share of public services; in Berkeley and Raleigh to distribute parks and recreation resources according to need, thereby serving less mobile, low-income and black neighborhoods with a higher level of services; in Macon County, North Carolina to provide owner-built, low-income housing; in Astoria, Oregon, Bingen, Washington; and Fort Bragg, California to restore declining local economies previously dependent on logging and fishing by developing alternative, landscape-generated job opportunities; in Aurora, North Carolina to prevent a multi-national company from mining the town and

then to address racial segregation that was contributing to the town's demise; in Hollywood and Pasadena, California to provide housing for the homeless and people living in single room occupancy units; in Manteo, North Carolina to develop a new economy that matched the unemployed with cultural, natural and historic resources. In this last case, we were able to monitor environmental injustices over time to evaluate the success of the plan in creating a more equitable community.

In each case the local environmental barriers to justice are the same: uneven distribution of environmental resources, inaccessibility and exclusion. And in each case the strategy is to isolate an injustice, concretize and overcome it. This effort creates a geometry of justice, too subtle for many design critics to read but readily apparent to those whom the struggle has freed from an oppression. They tell me that the geometry is quite beautiful and even elegant although it lacks classical, artistic precedent.

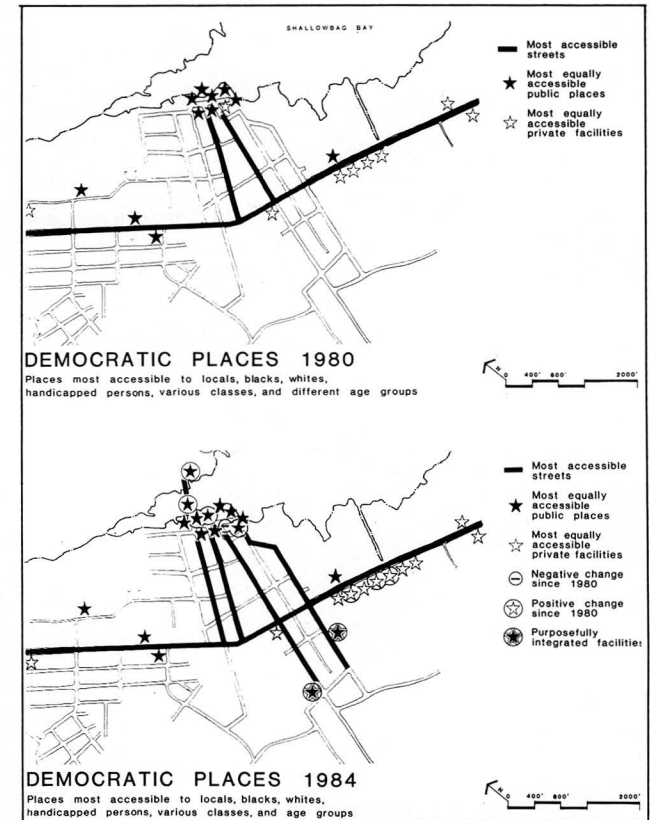
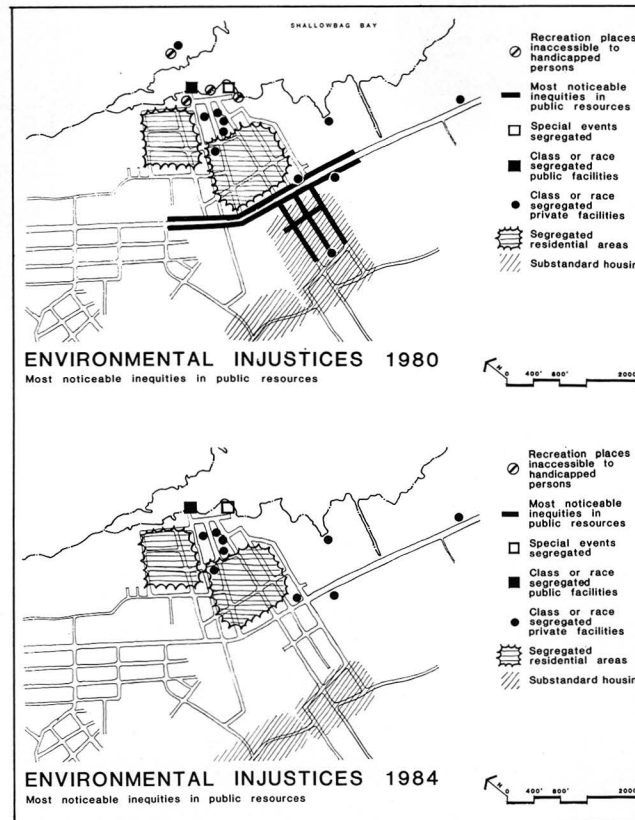
Participation and Advocacy

While connectedness and justice play the leading roles, participation and advocacy provide the supporting cast. The former are the ends, or, to designers, the products; the latter, the means or process. Whereas, connectedness and justice have physical if subtle geometries, the geometries of participation and advocacy are temporal, theatrical scores that may be read, but that vary according to any given performance and the performers. The form of participation has changed over the last two decades

from protest, civil disobedience and disruption to high technology collaboration, genteel, nominal group techniques, and neighborhood work sessions. Although there are still occasional street performers, small interior circles make up most of the participation script today.

The educative geometry of participation has also changed. Once the participatory design process was viewed as primarily a means whereby users told the designer what they wanted in order to achieve a socially more suitable environment. Today that script is much more transactive, a partnership that encourages two-way communication and education. I find the transactive process to be para-advocacy for equity and connectedness. Again the Runyon Canyon process serves as an illustration. The educative progression overcame much of the environmental alienation that plagued the community by informing and directing the users from place knowing, to place understanding, to place caring.

To know a place means a user can name it, locate it, define or describe it, and abstractly attribute some use to it. In this way, one might "know" Bangkok, Yellowstone National Park, or Runyon Canyon without having visited them. In the *Earthsea Trilogy* by Ursula LeGuin, the Wizard of Earthsea attained great power over something by simply naming it; conversely the naming of something gives that something power over the one who knows its name. This is particularly true if "naming" creates curiosity or leads to continued interest. Place knowing is concretized when one describes a place to another. This is what the listening step of design is all about. My partner, the Wizard of Listening, is a master at this — using a highly structured interview without it seeming structured at all. She is able to get users and potential users to describe the place so personally that they seem to be describing the place to themselves as if she were not there.



Another way to encourage bonding via place knowing is simply to ask people to establish uses for a place. That is one reason for mailing out a questionnaire to everyone in a neighborhood as part of setting goals for a small park.

If place knowing does lead to continued interest, it progresses to place understanding. To understand a place, one knows not only its name, but also why it is the way it is and how it might change. The user attains a full, although often incomplete, awareness of the nature, character and functioning of the place. Historical, ecological, social, political and aesthetic details are aggregated. More importantly, place understanding requires knowledge of the relationships between these various tidbits within a context that is larger than one's narrow personal or vested interest. We find that place understanding is facilitated by both emotive and rational processes. Experiential techniques that actively engage users in site inventorying, mapping and design decision making seem most effective in

developing place understanding. This is why we spend so much time creating techniques for users to make design decisions themselves rather than excluding them after they have established a program for the site.

Place understanding prepares one to develop land stewardship in two ways. Indirectly, it creates the potential environment that Herbert Gans showed to be essential for developing regular use. More directly, place understanding contains a component called sympathetic awareness, whereby caring is an inherent part of understanding. I must say that, at this time, we have only a vague idea of the casual extent of these two processes. When one cares about a place, emotive value is attached to it. Like a love relationship with another person, place caring involves emotional bonding. This usually occurs as a result of regular or ritualistic use. That use may be symbolic, visual or physical. A sense of interdependence, ownership and responsibility develops for the place. One is willing to maintain

or manage the place, to take political action to protect it or enhance it. A thorough place understanding helps users know what to do.

The more one takes caring action, the more one understands; and a healthy cycle develops, whereby caring leads to understanding, leads to caring. Significant connectedness with the place results. This is the reverse of the vicious cycle of environmental anomie, placelessness and environmental abuse.

We have found that place caring is developed most readily when citizens draw their own plans, evaluate the plans, and attach a ranked value to the best plan; and when it is made clear that the responsibility for the place is theirs. The latter is particularly important when we have been actively involved with the users over a period of time, because they typically become dependent on us to organize and focus their stewardship. Desatellization has to occur before the community can become primary land stewards.

12 STEP MASTER PLAN PROCESS

SHOWING EXPECTED CITIZEN ATTITUDE CHANGE TOWARDS THE LANDSCAPE



1 LISTENING

Place Knowing



2 SETTING GOALS

Place Knowing



3 MAPPING & INVENTORY

*Place Knowing
Place Understanding*



4 INTRODUCING THE COMMUNITY TO ITSELF

*Place Knowing
Place Understanding*



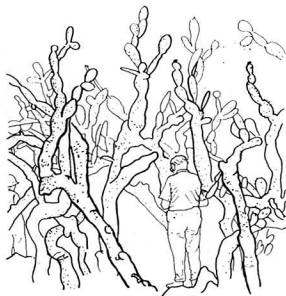
5 GETTING A GESTALT

*Place Understanding
Place Caring*



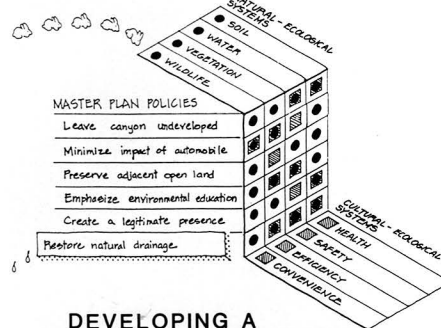
6 DRAWING ANTICIPATED ACTIVITY SETTINGS

Place Understanding



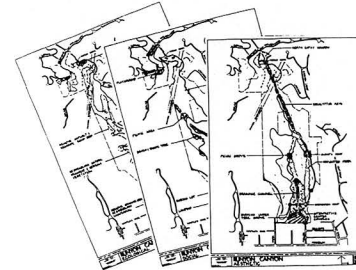
7 IDIOSYNCRACIES INSPIRE FORM

Place Understanding



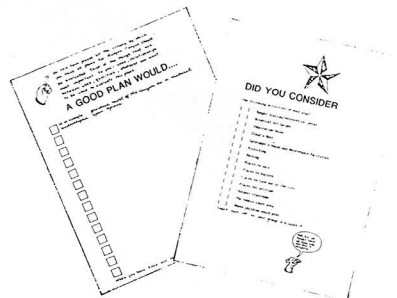
8 DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL YARDSTICK

Place Understanding



9 SPECTRUM OF PLANS

*Place Understanding
Place Caring*



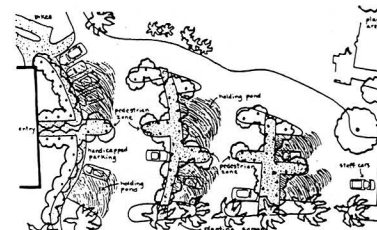
10 EVALUATING COSTS & BENEFITS

Place Caring



11 TRANSFERRING RESPONSIBILITY

Place Caring



12 EVALUATION AFTER CONSTRUCTION

Place Understanding

Notorious for past environmental abuse and disconnectedness, Los Angeles provided a serious test for our process. One most important proof of its effectiveness is the volunteer group, Friends of Runyon Canyon, that developed from the process. They continue to meet for weekly clean-ups, education sessions, funding campaigns and to walk the Canyon for the joy it gives when it is well cared for.

At critical points in the participatory process, the landscape architect not only facilitates but also advocates for connectedness and environmental equity. We recently were interviewing for a job we very much wanted, but knew we were up against stiff competition. The interview was going well until a member of the interview committee asked us what we would do about the homeless living in the parks in the area. We knew that the city wished to rid the area of the homeless, near homeless and single room occupants. Without a moment's hesitation my partner, Marcia McNally, said, "We will force you to deal with the problem, and until adequate housing is available it is useless and wasteful to push the homeless out of one area into another." Dead silence. In spite of her advocacy, we got the job. I should say that although we are direct about our values we don't usually advocate so bluntly so early in the process. We continued to advocate for housing throughout the design process. After several months of work our committee became enthusiastic about the housing ideas and adopted a plan calling for rezoning and incentives for market rate housing plus public and non-profit actions to provide a full range of housing including single room occupancy.

Passive facilitation writes weak fiction. Aggressive advocacy, astutely placed, can make dreams of environmental justice reality.