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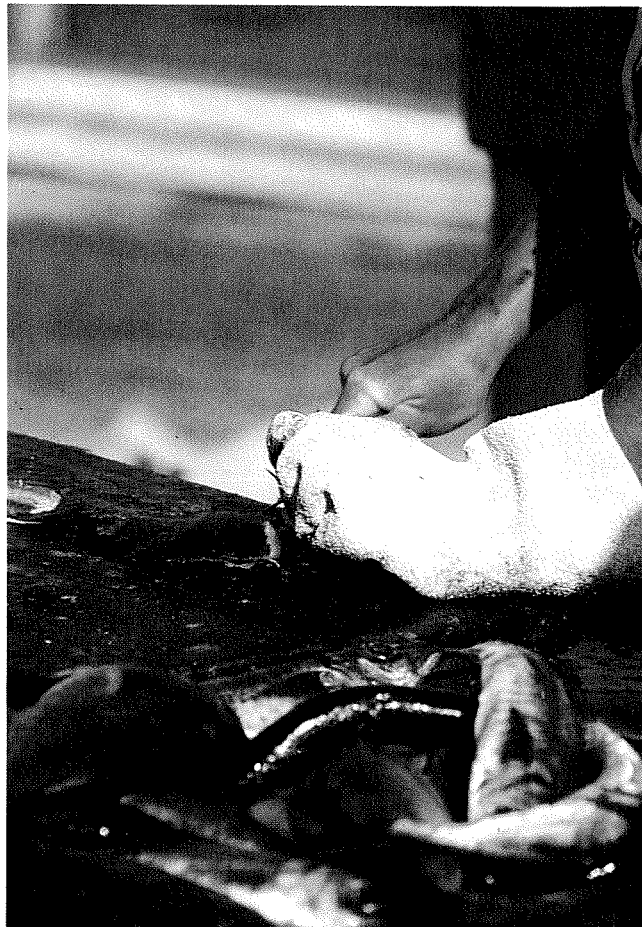
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SOCIAL VALUES IN OPEN SPACE DESIGN

I am going to pose a question and answer it straight away. Is the designer's contribution to urban open space all decorative? I believe very firmly that it is not.

I propose six characterizations of open space that is being designed today. Each seems to be both class-based and related to emerging patterns in society. All of these types of open space, all of these designs, are inspired by social values in many ways.

The first is open space as a machine for recreating. The second is open space as a consumer item. The third I call "juxtapositions," things that are turned on their heads. The fourth is open space as an economic resource. This is related to poorer communities, where the task is turning metaphorical waste products such as "fish heads" into useful community resources. The fifth is open space as a medium for reconnection, primarily to the natural environment, to natural processes, and to the community. The sixth is topophilia.



**All graphics and photographs
by Randolph T. Hester, Jr.**

Landscape Design, Social Values, and Innovation

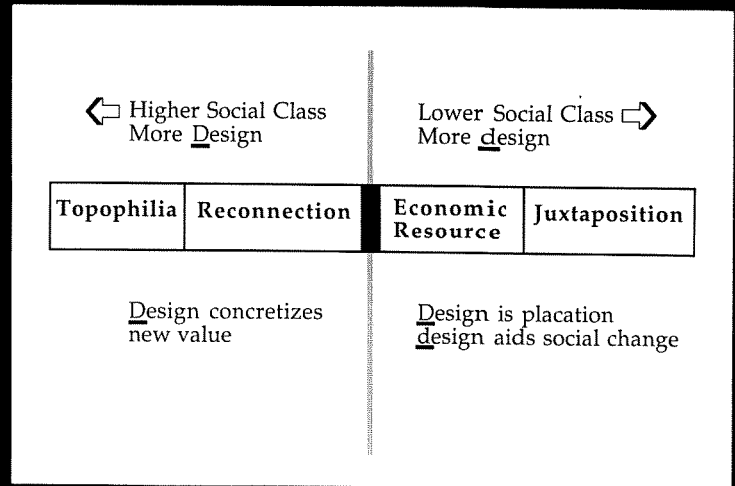
If we talk about the designer giving form to spoken or prevailing social values, then for most landscape architects open space design has become very repetitive, copy cat, largely superficial, and merely decorative. But it does not have to be that way.

Designers can give form, for example, to unspoken social values, or values of which people are unaware. Giving form to these is clearly not a decorative exercise. We can give form to the social values of those who cannot speak or, in our society, are not empowered or listened to when they do speak: the poor, the old, the young, minorities.

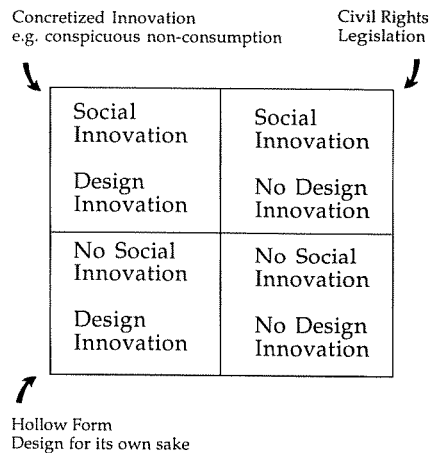
The designer can give form to unspeakable values, those related to sex, particularly to the sensual landscape, and social change—radical, in however modest a form. The designer can give form to the values of ecology and nature. And finally, the designer gives form to unthought values. These may be emerging in the literature or in philosophy or even childrens’ books, novels, theatre, or other art forms that a designer actually embodies.

It is clear there are opportunities for social change that are not related to design innovation. But there are plenty of cases in which social innovation is accompanied by design innovation. Rob Thayer offered a simple example of this when he wrote about what happened at the solar community Village Homes in Davis, California. Residents of Village Homes, which Thayer described as a community of “conspicuous non-consumption,” created an image of a different way to live. The concretization of their ecological values in an alternative environment became a very powerful precedent, an image that could be seen by others and understood, not just by talking about it but by seeing the image. Social change may be transmitted to others more readily when it is accompanied by a concrete design precedent.

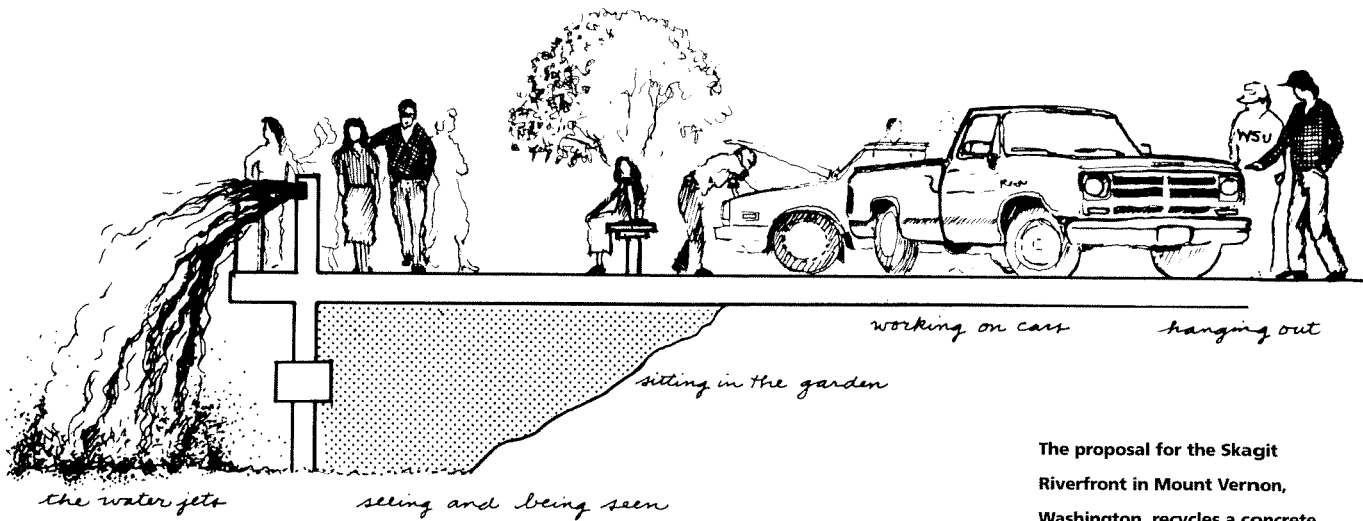
Landscape architecture is divided between serving the haves and the have-nots. For the lower social classes, the landscape can provide a financial resource for place-appropriate economic development; the upper classes yearn to reconnect with the landscape and natural processes from which they are divorced.



Relationship of Social and Design Innovation



When design innovation accompanies social innovation, the social ideal is concretized, providing a powerful precedent that speeds the acceptance of the social change.



The proposal for the Skagit Riverfront in Mount Vernon, Washington, recycles a concrete revetment as a parking garden, an unusual juxtaposition of people and cars. A pedestrian promenade, water sculpture, and flowers are intermixed with traditional working class uses, such as viewing from and repairing automobiles.

Many of the works landscape architects are producing are machines for recreating. Whether or not they are richly textured—in many cases they are still sterile—they are very segregated, largely insulated from natural processes, and in many ways contribute to the alienation that we feel from both other people and the natural environment.

The other very powerful negative type of landscape that is being produced is open space as a consumer item. The value of open space as a consumer item has as much to do with its status as it does with its function. This open space must continually be changed, because, as soon as those in lower social classes have adopted it and incorporated it into their lives, it loses its status. This is what we call “designer design,” which cannot be ignored.

To focus on characterizations that are more hopeful, although still difficult, I shall use projects on which my firm has worked as illustrations. Open space as juxtaposition and as economic resource are characterizations primarily

related, in the work we do, to the lower social classes. On the other side of the class barrier are the two other characterizations: reconnection to community and to natural processes, and topophilia.

Juxtaposition

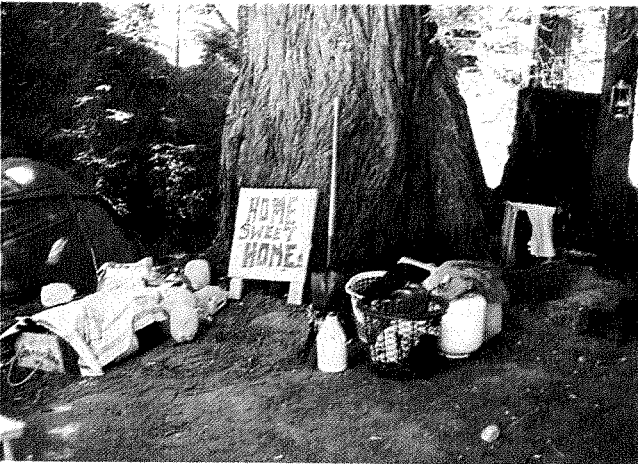
“Juxtaposition” means turning something on its head. The revetment in Mount Vernon, Washington, along the Skagit River, is a project on which we are working. The revetment was built in the 1950s as a parking lot, during an era when townpeople turned their backs on the river, dumped their garbage in it.

Today, everyone in Mount Vernon has an opinion about the revetment. There are people who would like to reclaim that space. There are people who say it should be torn down. There are people who think it is one of the most sacred of places in the community, and should remain totally parking.

What we’ve proposed is a people and car garden that takes in the entire revetment. Rather than separating the auto-

mobile from the pedestrian space, the pedestrian actually becomes a part of the parking lot. Granted, we have given the pedestrian almost all the space next to the river for strolling, but we have acknowledged that working on the automobile or simply sitting in the car and viewing the river also is important. That is what is different: turning the idea of a parking lot into a garden. We are acknowledging the automobile as an important part of recreation by putting those two functions, which are normally segregated, together.

Another juxtaposition: every project on which we are working, every open space project, is home. The people who live there do not become homeless, in fact, until we start working. We found a home while working in California’s Jackson State Forest, almost an archetypical home. There was a “Home, Sweet Home” sign and a clothes line. It was very ecological; the clothes line was in a sunny spot. There was a fire pit and a living room. It was a three-bedroom home, tents separated by trees for



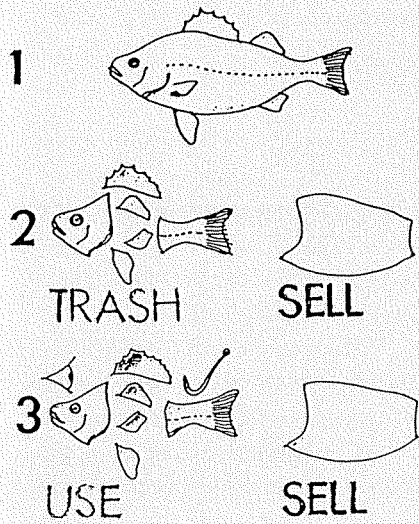
One of the most troubling juxtapositions is the use of public open space as home for the homeless. In central cities, people sleeping over hot air vents are an all too familiar sight. Amidst the redwood trees of California's Jackson State Forest, homeless set up housekeeping out of broken vehicles and define territories that include room delineations and recreation space.

privacy. There was an open garage area for working on vehicles. This home was complete with a dog pen, a mother, and a whole litter of baby pups.

What does the designer do about this? In Jackson State Forest we refused to say that our research suggested that recreation visitors were put off by the homeless living there. The people who manage the forest were trying to reduce the length of stay allowed there, and we refused to write a letter saying that our research suggested that the recreation experience was diminished by the presence of the homeless. That's not very much. But it points to the difficulty that we have, as designers, in addressing this kind of problem.

In Los Angeles, when we started designing the 133-acre open space where Runyon Canyon comes down to Hollywood Boulevard, we found immediately the primary users were people who lived there. We talked to each person who lived there and came to understand the differences in their motivations. Some considered themselves permanent residents and were not going to leave under any circumstances, if allowed to stay. Two people were passing through, pimping and prostituting.

One thing designers can do in these kinds of situations is simply not to design anything in those areas in which people are living. The transition chaparral in Runyon Canyon happens to be a place where some people live, so we are not proposing anything there. My partner, Marcia McNally, disagrees about whether this policy of benign neglect will work. I am arguing it is likely that people will continue to live there, even after the open space is developed. Marcia argues our intervention will make it impossible for people to continue to live there, even though there will be some places left undeveloped.



In poor communities, the landscape architect is often called on to discover previously unrecognized environmental resources, which can be used to benefit the poorest citizens by providing new jobs or diversifying a stagnant economy. The task is to turn such metaphorical fish heads and tails into something as valuable as filets.

Landscape as an Economic Resource

Whatever the resources are in any poor community, the most obvious marketable ones have already been taken. Often they are being exploited by companies from outside the community, which remove the resource without concern for the community or the landscape itself.

When doing community development work, then, the goal is to find things that seem to be worthless and make them into something that benefits the people in the community where it is needed. This is what I mean by fish heads—when all the filets, the most obvious resources, are taken, the role of the landscape architect is to find the fish heads and tails and turn them into some profit for the community. Half the work that is being done in our office is helping communities find fish heads and tails in the landscape.

The “fish head” terminology comes from a project we did in Astoria, Oregon, some years ago, in which we observed the place at which visitors most frequently stopped was where the fish heads and tails and guts came blasting out of a processing plant. We literally centered our design around the fish heads. There is a linear park along the railroad tracks connecting the Maritime Museum and the Port of Astoria, two major attractions in their own right. On this park, however, is the central attraction: the backs of the fish processing plants, where visitors get a sense of the real work done at the docks.

Now, people who work in those industries can’t imagine why other people would want to see those things. So there is always a roar of laughter when we say that people who work on the thirtieth floor of a high rise building in San Francisco or Seattle, for whom work is pushing paper, going to the Xerox machine, talking on the phone, or faxing, are really starved to see real work. And they will pay.

Another project typical of finding an unused resource is one I started a long time ago in Raleigh, North Carolina, in a neighborhood that was scheduled for urban renewal clearance. In this case the fish head was a huge amount of open space in the interior of each block, space that had largely been abandoned.

We said, “You don’t have to do urban renewal clearance. In that inner block you can build new housing on new streets. The people who you were going to clear can actually move into those new units. You can tear down the old units at that point, if you have to, or you can rehabilitate them.” The whole idea of urban renewal was demolished by a fish head, the simple recognition that there was open space that could be used for the community’s benefit, to temporarily relocate people while new housing was built on each block.

Reconnection to Nature and Community




We have clients on the other side of the class line, people like us, who want to be connected to natural processes in the worst kind of way.

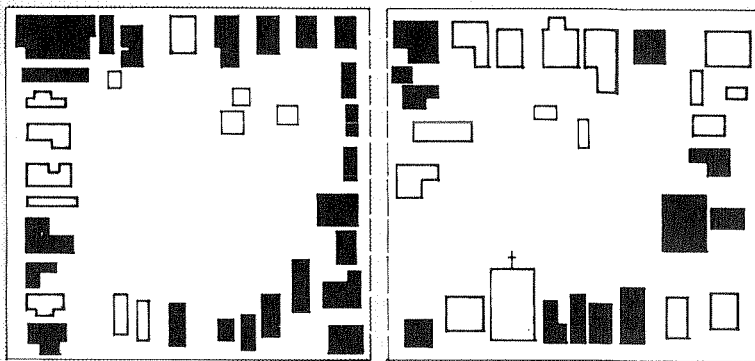
What typifies our work in Runyon Canyon is the creation of wild nature in the city. Our plan called for making an urban wilderness in Hollywood by re-establishing more than a hundred acres of native chaparral. The primary problem was applying appropriate technology to revegetation and flood control.








The plan for phased block-by-block street rearrangement and housing infill capitalized on the unused interior open spaces and prevented urban renewal clearance of the black Chavis Heights neighborhood. The plan ultimately led to the rehabilitation of substandard housing as well as renewed sense of pride among the residents.

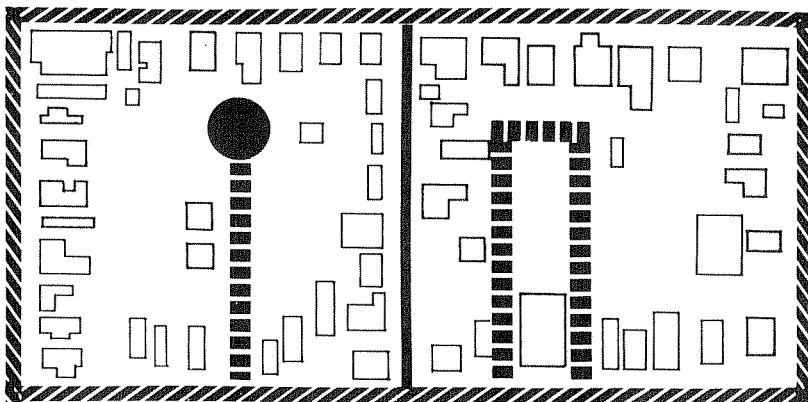
Existing Block Conditions

-  Existing deteriorated structures
-  Existing repairable structures
-  Existing right-of-way






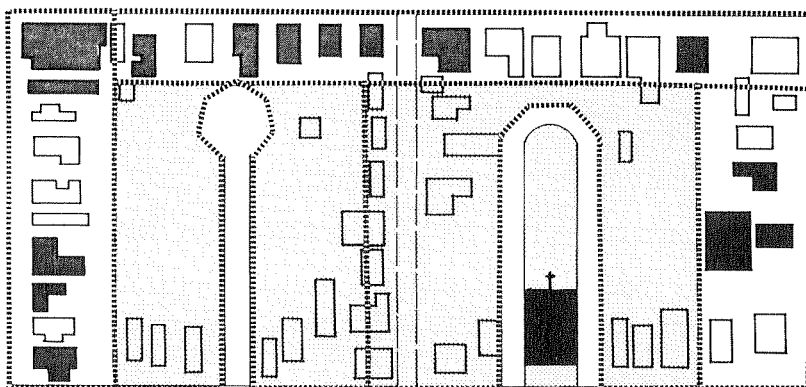
**Phase 1
Block Rehabilitation**

-  Existing right-of-way
-  New right-of-way
-  Abandoned right-of-way
-  Repairable structures to remain
-  Turning circle






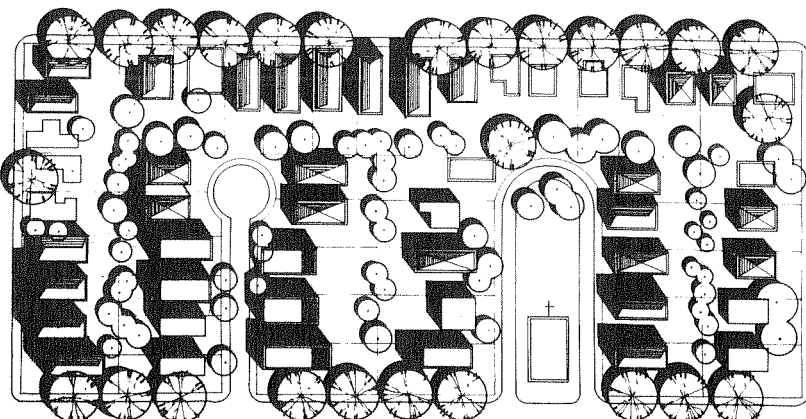
**Phase 2
Block Rehabilitation**

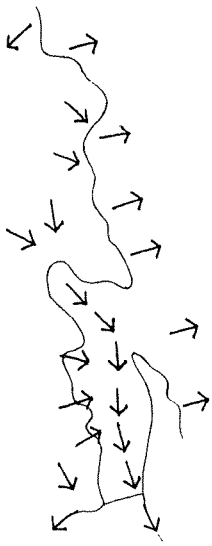
-  New streets built in block interiors.
-  New houses constructed in gray areas, and sold to residents.
-  Houses to be replaced



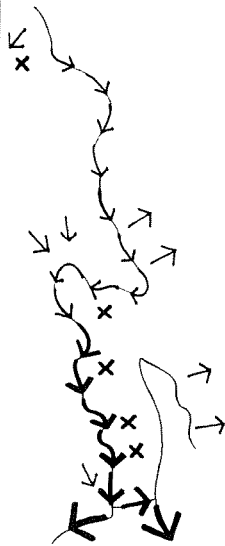
**Phase 3
Block Rehabilitation**

-  New structures
-  Rehabilitated structures moved
-  Rehabilitated structures

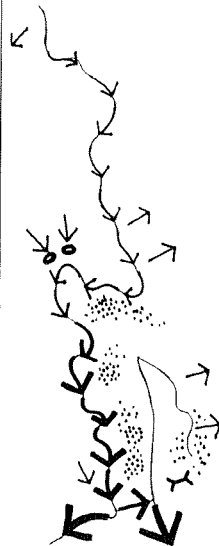




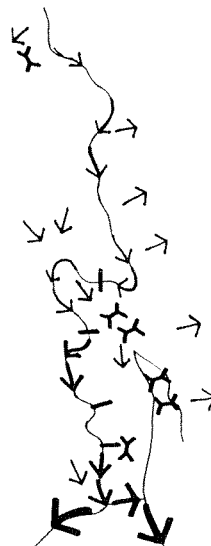
1900
No road; no development; water flows evenly distributed in natural watersheds.



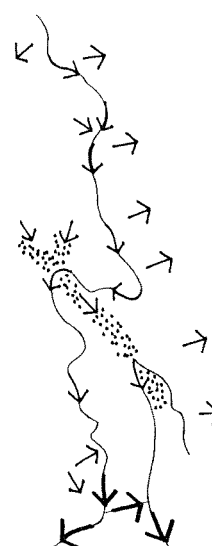
1985
Runyon Canyon Road channels water: preventing natural flow; exacerbating peak flow damage; serious gully, flood, and mud damage; R & P does emergency maintenance.



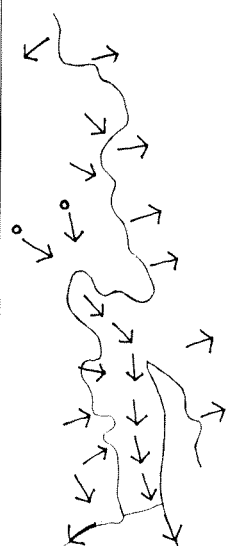
1986
Fill gullies; replant eroded areas; install guzzlers for wildlife; build parking lot as series of check dams.



1988
Install down-drains to return 30% of water to original sub-watershed; build small check dams to control peak flows.



1989
Replant riparian vegetation along restored valley; return 60% of water to original sub-watershed; discontinue irrigation of first-year plantings.



1992
Return 90% of water to original sub-watershed; possibly restore springs.

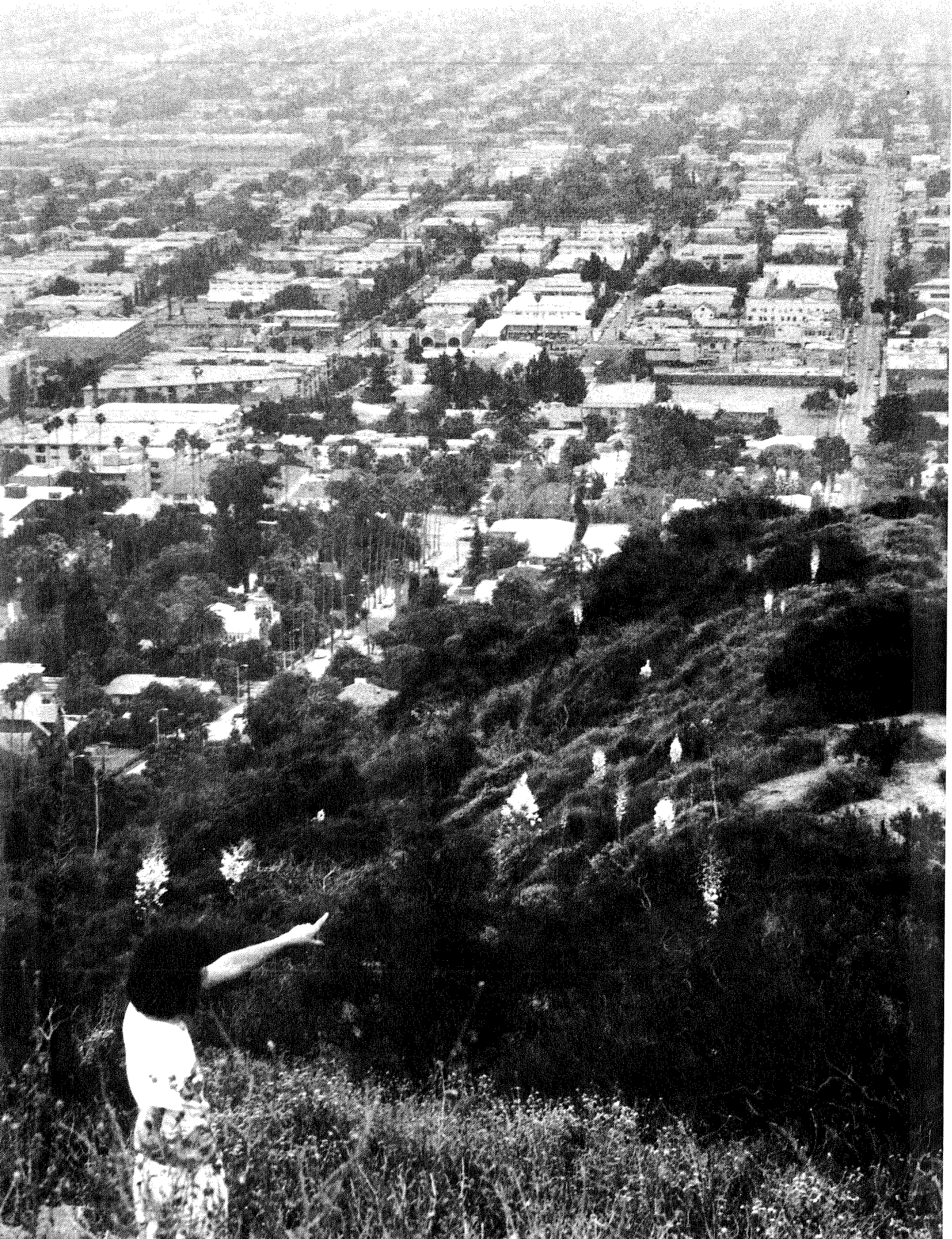
For years, citizens fought the developers who wanted to bulldoze the canyon. The city got the land and decided it had to bulldoze the canyon to create a huge dam so there wouldn't be flooding downstream. The alternative, then, that we had to come up with was: How can you manage water so it won't destroy homes down the hill, manage fire so it won't be a threat to people, and manage mud slides so they won't kill people? People had been opposed to the wilderness because of these inconveniences and life-threatening situations. Our plan showed them how to use simple check dams, labor intensive revegetation, and erosion repair to create an urban wilderness.

Another type of reconnection comes with saying, in some dramatic way, "Hey, look at what you've done, and let's think about how it can be done differently." One of the opportunities in

Runyon Canyon was juxtaposing the wilderness with the city below. So we designed a path that keeps giving you the feeling that you are about to fall off it into the city. With each turn that feeling is dramatized. In the botanical art garden we designed a water feature in which the user controls the flow, heightening the awareness of the need for water conservation.

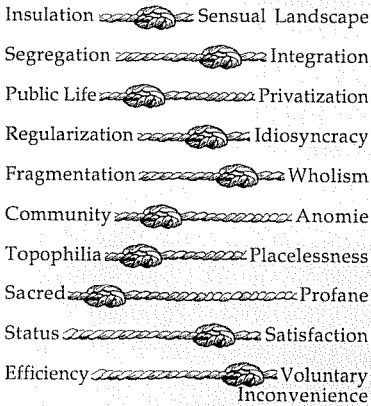
Another thing we realized is people want us to teach them about natural processes, and they want to re-establish a sense of community. In Runyon Canyon, people said at the end of the planning process, "The best thing about this is that we learned who our neighbors are." That's a rather terrible condemnation of the state of our society. In a sense it is also a hopeful thing that designers, by going through the design process, can actually play a role in re-establishing community.

Runyon Canyon, Los Angeles.
In order to make residents more aware of the landscape that naturally surrounds them, paths were designed to lead the walker to precipices. The urban wilderness and the city are dramatically juxtaposed.



CONFLICTS

Tugs-of-War



Society seems particularly conflicted about the landscape today, on the one hand becoming more insulated from it than ever before, on the other hand wanting its sensual pleasures. How the landscape designer resolves this and other value "tugs-of-war" is critical to the future relationship between people and nature.

Topophilia

Let me finish with a reconnection to the extreme: topophilia, our desire to be connected to places in an emotional; loving way, to make some very sacred places. In Manteo, North Carolina, we mapped the sacred structure—places people were unwilling to see changed in order to receive economic benefits for the community—and used that to inspire a downtown revitalization plan. In our concept, the sacred places stayed and we fit other things around them: attractions, points of economic growth. The shipbuilding industry had been dead there and we re-established it. This became a major attraction, turning that community around.

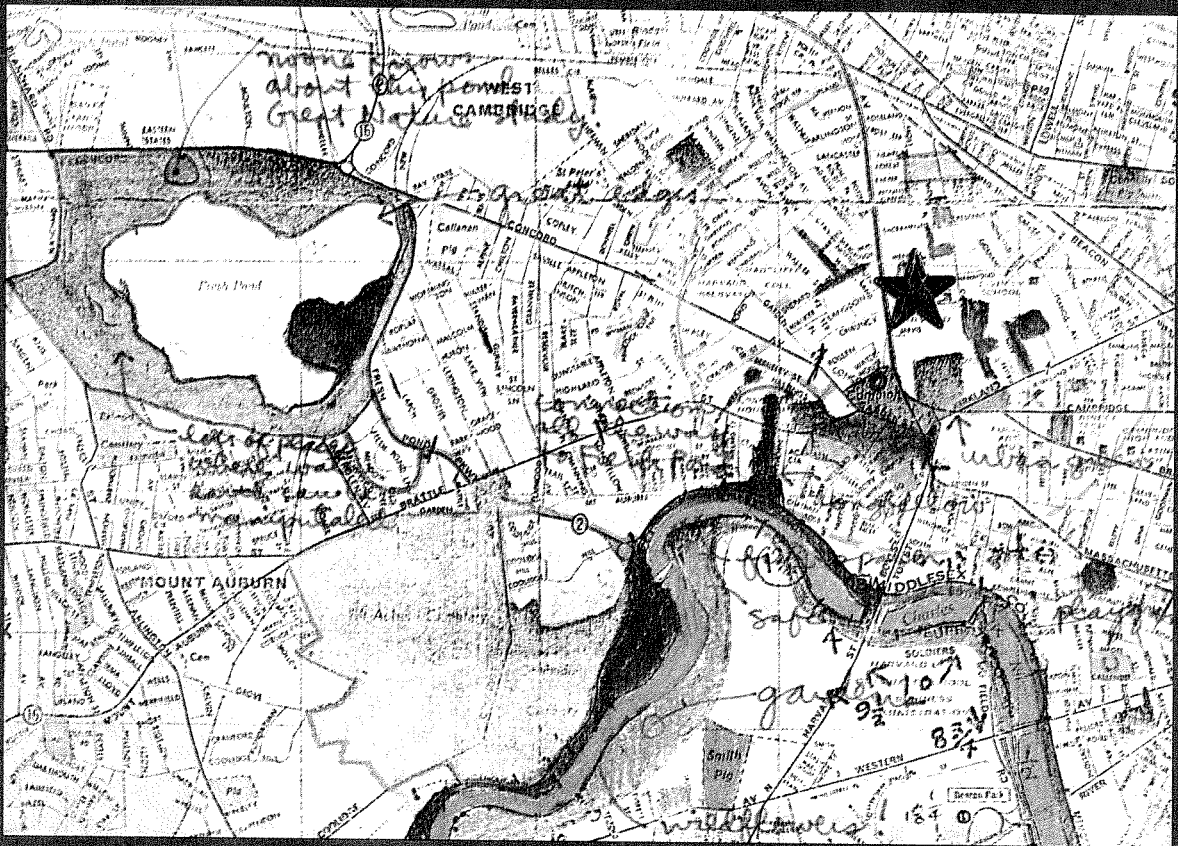
Users appear to be despairingly confused by conflicts between landscapes that are isolated and those that are sensual, landscapes that are fragmented and those that are holistic, and landscapes that are efficient and those that require voluntary inconvenience. What are designers to do? If the designer says something is beautiful, it is likely to go into the category of beauty and be preserved as something beautiful. If the designer says that something is ugly, it is likely to go into the category of the expendable and be expended.

Connecting Social Values to Landscapes We Love: A Hopeful Future

People express their values and tell us what they want when we engage them in a participatory process. When designing the Harvard Law Child Care Center some years ago, I surveyed the parents, who described what they wanted in perfect detail: a top-of-the-line child care center, like one that had just been built nearby. I was suspicious; every time the Harvard Law Child Care Center obtained extra money, it hired more staff. It never made physical improvements.

So I said, "Let me ask you again what kind of environment you would like to have at the center for your children. But I do not want to conduct a survey; I want you to tell me under hypnosis." The parents and the teachers did this, and gave us an entirely different set of answers. Rather than demanding a reproduction of the top-of-the-line center, they decided the first thing that had to be done was to plant a tree that was big enough for kids to climb on immediately. Then we identified all the natural remnants within a five- or ten-minute walk: riparian areas, streams with fish and frogs, creepy mud and sand to play in, and hideways to explore; all of the places to which staff could take children to play. We identified those, and they became the playground.

I close with this because it makes the point that designers can move beyond obvious, prevailing social values and help people express unspoken, unarticulated, or suppressed values—values they don't know they have. By doing this, design can transcend being pure decoration and help people reconnect with landscapes and natural processes they deeply value but from which they have become estranged. To the extent we can do this, we may present a future landscape that is much, much preferable to the one in which we live today.



Under hypnosis, staff and parents of the Harvard Law Child Care Center established an entirely different program for their facility than they had described through a survey. The result was a redesign that identified wild natural remnants, such as streams with fish and frogs, close enough to the center that children could use them as a playground.

