

# Imaginary Gardens with Real Frogs

## Space in the Work of Martha Schwartz

By Dean Cardasis

In his review of Peter Walker and Melanie Simo's *Invisible Gardens*, in the 1995 Winter/Spring GSD NEWS, Steven R. Krog cites several reasons for what he calls, "landscape architecture's crisis of confidence." Among these is our "enthusiasm for recognizing individual designers' achievements, which is then compromised by an unwillingness to critically evaluate the source and scope of that achievement." Krog's comment illuminates an interesting paradox in the career of Martha Schwartz.

Certainly Schwartz has succeeded in making her landscapes visible (at least to members of our own and allied disciplines). In doing so, she has enraged her detractors and encouraged her supporters; and she remains, arguably, the most talked-about designer in our field. Yet in the fifteen years since the Bagel Garden first appeared on the cover of *Landscape Architecture*, little useful criticism of her work has been written.

In general, discussions of Schwartz's designs have taken too little note of recent and relevant landscape design history and theory. Complaints that her landscapes are not "natural," according to the concepts of both eighteenth and nineteenth-century designers or of mid-twentieth-century architects, who viewed landscape as a neutral setting for their buildings, seem oddly out-of-date. Similarly, appreciations of the work that employ aesthetic criteria derived solely from painting and sculpture seem equally beside the point. How, then, might we usefully observe her work today?

One pertinent vantage point, I would suggest, is landscape design theory of the past half century. The discipline of landscape architecture, like those of painting, sculpture, and architecture, has for several decades been rigorously exploring the meaning of space (although these explorations may be even more "invisible" than our built works). As in much writing on the arts, this theoretical landscape writing uses analogies drawn from other disciplines, and lately some of

it has tended to blur the distinctions between the various disciplines' concepts of space. Indeed,

Schwartz's recent show at the GSD, "Off the Shelf," through the variety of spatial modes represented, encourages us to struggle again with the questions of what landscape shares with the other arts, and how it differs.

In 1939 the landscape architect James Rose observed, "Space is the constant in all three-dimensional design." With this statement he helped bring landscape architecture into a discussion that was ongoing among painters, sculptors, and architects. Even earlier, in a seminal *Pencil Points* article published in 1938, Rose compared models of his landscape designs to the two-dimensional patterning of "Russian Dance" by Van Doesburg and to Mies van der Rohe's 1923 project for a brick country house, as well as to sculptures by Gabo, Braque, and Schwitters; in doing so, he sought to relate contemporary landscape architecture to modern painting, sculpture, and architecture, in particular to those fields' exploration of space.

In subsequent design and theory, Rose continued to note similarities and distinctions between landscape architecture and the other spatial arts. In another *Pencil Points* essay, he situated landscape architecture along a line between sculpture and architecture. Landscape differed from both, he suggested, in having a horizontal dimension far more extensive than its vertical; this thus "[increases] the difficulty in getting a sense of volume and third dimension." Landscape also employs a larger scale than either sculpture or architecture, a scale "determined by the sky and surrounding country"; and some of its media plants are live, unstable, and "loose," making "a sense of form more difficult to achieve." Still later, in *Creative Gardens*, Rose explains more fully the relationship of landscape to sculpture. "I have found it helpful to think of a garden as sculpture," he wrote. "Not sculpture in



the sense of an ordinary object to be viewed. But sculpture that is large enough and perforated enough to walk through. And open enough to present no barrier to movement, and broken enough to guide the experience, which is essentially a communion with the sky. This is a garden.”

More systematically, Erno Goldfinger’s “The Sensation of Space,” part of a series of articles published in 1941-42 entitled *The Art of Enclosing Space*, analyzes the differences between the “pictorial,” which he defined as two-dimensional, static, and apprehended consciously from without; the “plastic,” which was three-dimensional (convex), stereoscopic, and also apprehended consciously from without; and the “spatial,” which was three-dimensional (concave), kinetic and apprehended sub-consciously from within. The enclosure of space was, to Goldfinger, the essence of the art of architecture; interestingly, rather than distinguishing between architecture and landscape, Goldfinger made no reference at all to landscape (although, as Rose had argued, the two differed fundamentally).

Reminiscent of Rose in sensibility, but of Goldfinger in systematic rigor, Joseph S.R. Volpe, in his 1989 paper, “The Avant Garde, the Rear Garde, and the Modes of Space: 2-D Flat, 3-D Object, Architectural Enclosure Open Landscape,” (published in the proceedings of “The Avant Garde and the Landscape: Can They Be Reconciled?”), does articulate a clear distinction between landscape and architecture. Although both involve the experience of space from within, landscape space is defined by the continuous planes of the sky and the earth; it is thus so expansive as to be more properly classified as “open” and therefore as constituting a fourth “mode” of space, a mode that contains all others. Or as Rose, who had argued that one might just as reasonably design a “sky plan” as a “floor plan,” put it, in *Modern American Gardens*, “A garden is not a bar-b-que or a flower. It is an experience. It is the experience of being within something while still out of doors.” Unlike architecture, whose basic function is to provide shelter, the basic function of landscape space is to provide engagement with the rest of the world.

All of which brings us back to the work of

Martha Schwartz. In 1980 the Bagel Garden shocked the landscape establishment — much as the work of Rose, Daniel Kiley, and Garrett Eckbo had forty years earlier — by asserting once again the “radical” notion that landscape architecture was a contemporary art, with clear aesthetic relationships to painting, sculpture, and architecture. Just as Rose, Kiley, and Eckbo had rebelled against what they viewed as the irrational hold of the Beaux Arts on landscape in the 1930s, Schwartz’s Bagel Garden was a strong counterpoint to the watered-down naturalism into which that earlier landscape rebellion had by then degenerated. Moreover, this tiny plot of land in Boston’s Back Bay made powerfully clear the need to create a contemporary art of landscape that fruitfully draw upon the ideas and use the language of painting and sculpture. With its grid of bagels on a ground of purple aquarium gravel, the Bagel Garden jolted our sleepy discipline, which, when it awoke, was not at all amused. Inspired by conceptual and environmental art, the Bagel Garden was whimsical but deadly serious, and the profession knew it — and knew, too, that it was being profoundly challenged.

Over the past decade and a half, Schwartz’s work has continued to reveal her fluency in the languages of contemporary painting and sculpture, as well as her strong sense of conceptual design. In view of how progressive landscape designers have struggled to define the meaning of “landscape space,” however, it’s interesting to note that Schwartz has worked often in spaces that are already volumetrically defined, and that her solutions have often focused on altering the two-dimensional ground plane. The 1980 Necco Garden, for example, located in a courtyard at MIT, used overlapping grids as a (flat) spatial organizing idea. With grids composed of Necco wafers (from the nearby Necco factory) and pastel-colored tires, the Necco Garden, unlike the Bagel Garden, was a space experienced from within. Already defined by the surrounding architecture, by the lawn and the sky, this temporary design modified the space by changing the two-dimensional graphic qualities of the ground plane.

A more recent (unbuilt) project, the 1991 Moscone Center/Howard Street Art Enrichment in San Francisco, is another example of Schwartz’s skillful manipulation of the ground

plane. Here, to modify the ground of the well-defined volume between the Moscone Center and the Yerba Buena Center, Schwartz designed a carpet of textures and colors. In other words, rather than attempting to redefine one's spatial experience by adjusting the position and nature of the volumetric edges, Schwartz accepts the volumes and concentrates on treating the character and meaning of the edges—especially the floor plane—much as a contemporary painter might work on a blank canvas, coaxing from it space and meaning.

In the mid-1980s, Schwartz's work began to show another, and very interesting, characteristic. Still working with spaces whose volumetric definition is given, Schwartz, in several projects of these years, "energizes" the space not only with imaginative treatment of the ground plane, but with the creation and placement of sculptural objects as well. Examples of this approach include the Citadel Grand Allee, of 1991, and the Splice Garden at the Whitehead Institute, of 1986; perhaps the best is the King County Jail Plaza, of 1987. Here again, Schwartz was working within a well-articulated space; and, although she does not choose to alter the volumetrics of the space, she does create and place strong garden symbols, including hedges, topiary, a fountain, and parterres, all made from concrete and ceramic tile. Their erratic placement, along with a bizarre juxtaposition of materials and the layers of stripes of the ground plane, does alter the sense of the space, evoking, as Schwartz says, "the feeling of being in a bad dream."

It seems to me significant that, even in projects with poorly-defined or amorphous spaces—such as the 1987 International Swimming Hall of Fame (unbuilt as designed)—Schwartz continues to rely upon the power of metaphoric ideas, borrowed cultural images and symbols, and the language of two- and three-dimensional art to create spatial meaning and to hold the space. Her success in exploring these tactics is clear, and makes her work original and instructive. And yet Schwartz's design of the landscape space we move through and come to rest within appears to be almost incidental; this aspect of the work seems to be approached with less joy and rigor

than other aspects described above. While giving powerful voice to the meaning of art in the landscape, Schwartz's work has not yet attempted a full exploration of the silent, between-the-lines meaning of landscape space.

This may, however, be changing. Recent commissions in Schwartz's Cambridge office have included complex and large-scale urban design projects. Although she continues to find inspiration in painting, sculpture, and environmental art, Schwartz seems to be struggling, in these works, to realize her artistic vision (she describes this frustration in the roundtable on urban public space in the Winter/Spring 1995 GSD NEWS). Having studied the designs, I cannot help wondering whether this difficulty might be a blessing in disguise—that Schwartz's artistic vision might be enlarged by the anguish of confronting the complexities and contradictions of such work. Given that she has pursued her vision with great courage and conviction, I do not believe that Schwartz will allow this dilemma to compromise the integrity of her work; and the possibility that it might encourage her to explore more fully the essence of landscape space—how it can form experience and create meaning—seems to me very exciting.

This important struggle is evident, I think, in two recent projects. Currently under construction is the Jacob Javits Federal Building East Plaza in New York City—the former site of Richard Serra's infamous steel sculpture, "Tilted Arc," removed several years ago. Schwartz's design uses standard elements of New York City parks to create a French-style "parterre." This parterre, made essentially of a continuous bench, can be understood as such when viewed from the upper floors of the surrounding buildings. On the ground the sinuous bench defines a series of corridors and nodes (note the spatial language!) within the plaza. Here are the aspects we expect to find in a work by Martha Schwartz: humor, metaphor, and two-dimensional richness on the ground plane (from above); but we find also what seems to be a keener recognition that the design of the volume itself—the *space* through which we move and in which we come to rest—is inextricable from the meaningfulness and utility of the work. An even more ambitious project is

the design of the Baltimore Inner Harbor. Here, more than any other work to date, Schwartz grapples with the meaning of creating landscape volumes; here she is working to create spaces that have what she describes as both specific and universal meaning, spaces that possess intellectual and emotional power and work on many levels of understanding. Thus her current projects have within them the seeds of richer and fuller work; and the difficulty she has experienced in working with them speaks of the conflict between her goal of making the landscape visible, legible, and memorable, and the need to design meaningful landscape volumes.

Looking at the past fifteen years of Martha Schwartz's work, one cannot help but be impressed by the rigor with which she explores the landscape through the use of analogies from the other arts. And yet, as I've tried to suggest, the validity of such analogies, in the creation of landscape space, is limited. The Bagel Garden opened for landscape architects an important door to other contemporary arts, and thus urged us to take a fresh look at our art; but it seems clear now that it also closed the door on some useful and important aspects of our recent

heritage—the exploration of the meaning of landscape volume itself—by ignoring landscape space's paradoxical essence as space that encloses and yet connects us to the larger world. Even with this limitation, though, the importance and usefulness of Schwartz's work—her professional and artistic odyssey—to other designers and students cannot, in my view, be overstated. She has inspired experimentation. She has reinstated our need to explore the other arts as a foil. She has championed "culture" as an essential component of the design of spaces. She has awakened us to the importance of the clear expression of ideas, and to the importance of the "landscape" which exists within us.

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