DESIGN AS A VALUE SYSTEM

I want to describe design not in its usual meaning but as a value system. We are quite clearly in the grip of a real dilemma of goals and objectives in our society, if not in the world. Certainly we are in our profession.

On the one hand, there is great affluence. Materialism is rampant; money-making is a primary motivation; and the Harvard MBA is everywhere. Because of the primacy of television as a source of information we are surrounded by surrogate experience, not real-life experience, and it is hard to tell what is real or unreal anymore. As a columnist has said, "something is horribly wrong." Everything is packaged these days and the packaging has become the real reality.

We are surrounded by image-making architects who design very special places where columns are hollow. It's hardly a good idea to lean against them because you could be sued for denting them. The entire project, actually, has a hollow ring. Everything seems to be designed to evoke a stage-set image these days, having very little to do with the actual activities going on within the building or the landscape.

Everywhere developers are hiring architects and landscape architects to authenticate their deals by making buildings and open spaces which, like advertisements, call attention to the project. It has become a form of corporate pimping, if you will. It leaves the architect to serve out his role as what Philip Johnson calls "a design whore." The designs are profoundly phony; Disneylandish structures and landscapes without meaning, or profundity, or sense of value. They are full of sound and fury, but signify nothing socially relevant.
At the other end of the scale, as Randolph Hester points out, are the home- 
less, the disadvantaged, the socially burdensome; the planet’s ecological balance
is threatened. Real-life communities and small-town neighborhoods are
disintegrating in the face of shopping centers full of silly shops selling trendy
knickknacks and donuts and taking over from the authentic downtown of the
village or town.

I get the impression that most young people these days are bemused or
dependent rather than appalled at the directions that we are going in or
what our values are and how to achieve them.

What is design really all about? Design, particularly environmental design, has
a profound responsibility.

It is, in a sense, the bearer of the cultural value system of a community. For that
reason, environmental design goes beyond the visual; it is much more
pervasive. It deals with cultural issues, with context, with lifestyle, with social
and economic issues; it has profound ecological ramifications and influences on
the future of the planet; it deals with the whole community as well as the indi-
vidual; it is contributing to a human ecology and, in

that sense, it must be multi-sensory and holistic.

And, I think, holistic is the operative word.

Perhaps more importantly, landscape design must go much deeper than
image-making, which simply trivializes it. It is, after all, not a matter of con-
stantly changing styles, as some people think—like

the cycle of new fash-
ions each season. It has

nothing to do with old-
fashioned carpet bedding
or mudhole, intrusive grid-
ded patterning on the
ground, which is the more
recently stylish way of
doing things.

Landscape design is
about social relevance. It
can become poetic and
symbolic, but, perhaps
most importantly, it can
articulate a culture’s most
spiritual values.

For its best meaning, it
can strive to externalize
and make feasible spiritual
values—for individuals, for
a community, and for the
whole planet. The role of
the landscape designer, can
be similar to the role of a
Shaman who, in the Dutch
teacher Boven’s words, “can
transform base materials
into mystical touchstones.

Beautiful term.

In that way, landscape
design is like alchemy.

That is what makes it an
important art form, and
why, in fact, it is worthy
for us to pursue this partic-
ular profession.
Seattle Freeway Park

In the gorge at the freeum Park is "Tahoe" "beauy" below the water fall at Yosemite.

Seattle's Freeway Park, inspired by the landscape of Yosemite National Park. Photograph and drawings by Lawrence Halprin.
Some of the most remarkable transformational environments I have personally experienced exhibit manifestations of spiritual values. They have altered my life.

What they seem to do is release in people something inherent inside them, something that is already there. They evoke some basic need, which lies dormant until it is evoked.

These environments speak to us at a basic, human, archetypical level, revealing to us our latent human and spiritual values.

Lawrence Halprin’s drawings are a very special record of his search for forms that can call forth a spiritual response in public urban places. Most frequently his studies of natural forms and process have captured attention; they reveal, in notation and graphic gestures, the complexity of responses that are so characteristic of unfermented natural environments.

The drawings also tell us how Halprin, time and time again, has been able to shape places that embody the wonder and fecundity of nature, that invite exploration, and that touch depths of feeling that conventional wisdom would not acknowledge.

When I asked for a set of drawings to include in this issue, Larry invited me to go
through his most recent sketch book. As a preliminary, we
discussed the points included in this issue’s editorial: that good
places are distinct and memorable, often with characteriz-
ing allusions; that it is important that places sustain
collection and continuing attractions; that places should
allow for personal interaction; and that places device from
multiple sources and are open to continuous change.

"Yes," Larry said, "that’s what I’ve been trying to get
across. There are all versions of natural process applied to
building; it doesn’t matter what you build it out of. We like
such things because they come out of biological process.
But I would add that good
places always have responded to humor and fantasy.”

"On," I suggested, "re-activa-
tion. All are involved in mak-
ing something more out of the
world than it is."

Looting through the sketch
books, it was clear to me that
natural forms were not the
only ones that Larry explored,
and that humor and fantasy
were also constant companions.
Midway through a recent
notebook was a letter to Bruno
Zevi outlining some thoughts
on a recent project for Florence,
The Fiat Novoli. The letter,
which we have reproduced on
the following pages, offers a
nice glimpse into the evolution
of an idea. We have also
reproduced above the drawing
generated from the workshop
to which the letter refers as a
starting point.

—Dunton Lyndon
Dear Bruno-- I am sorry not to have been able to show you the park myself but have asked Stahl to explain it to you for me next week.

THE WORKSHOP #2 DIAGRAM.

At the end of the 2nd workshop the "collective drawing" which was arrived at by a great burst of intense emotion and consensus of the group working as a whole--set the central open space as a park. The park was left to be designed as a great modern garden serving the needs of the public and there was a strong feeling that its proposed circular form be broken and cracked at the edges so that it not be static!

When I came back to San Francisco I started working with the O & it continued to confuse me because it seemed to remain static and too introverted.

One of our constant requirements for new one is that it be able to reach out and include the neighborhoods and relate to the outside world as well. The O
Halprin’s letter to Bruno Zevi describing the evolution of the design of a park at Flat Rock.

Courtesy Lawrence Halprin.