

## ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

From Robin Lawrence, “Urban Images: This Place Right Now,” *Urban Insights* (catalogue of the exhibition, Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005).

An internationally renowned landscape architect, writer, and educator based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Anne Whiston Spirn visited Kamloops in May 2004, during the Cultural Future of Small Cities forum. The public talk and slide presentation she delivered at that time share their title with her 1998 book, *The Language of Landscape*. In both, she has asserted that “Landscapes were the first human texts, read before the invention of other signs and symbols.” As with language, landscape contains “patterns of shape, structure, material, formation, and function” that, consciously or unconsciously, we can learn to read. Human beings, she says, have been reading landscape for millennia, as part of our successful adaptation to our environment. To be fluent in the language of landscape is a form of “empathy” – and the best landscape architecture is just that: fluent and empathetic, creating landscapes that are “functional, sustainable, meaningful, and artful.”

We are all “imprinted,” Spirn says, with the landscape in which we spent our early years. Where we live in our childhood determines whether we feel at home or alienated in the places we occupy as adults. Often, she points out, we will attempt to replicate in adulthood what was socially and psychologically most familiar and comfortable to our young selves. In Spirn’s photographs of Kamloops, we can see evidence of European settlers imposing an image of the pastoral on arid hills and slopes, planting cherry trees and lilac bushes where once there was sagebrush and pine. Spirn’s thinking complements Postmodern ideas about the social construction of landscape, that is, the idea that the natural world does not exist apart from the ways in which a culture perceives and depicts it. However, she argues a variation on this notion: that, in any definition of landscape, the built environment cannot be extricated from the natural environment, that both city *and* country are subject to the same natural and cultural processes.

In her book, *The Language of Landscape*, Spirn sets out the etymological roots of the word “landscape,” demonstrating that *land* “means both a place and the people living there,” and *scape* means “to shape.” However, in our impulse to shape, to settle, claim, control, and develop, we often ignore the fact that cities are part of the natural world. One of Spirn’s greatest professional contributions has been in designing urban landscapes that respectfully coexist with – rather than pave over, build upon or controvert – naturally occurring flood plains and drainage systems. Her work shows us that reading landscape is not about arrogantly imposing a pre-existing text. It’s about understanding the profound interdependence of nature and culture. “To call some landscapes natural and others artificial or cultural misses the truth that landscapes are never wholly one or the other.”

Photography is one of the tools Spirn uses to investigate and understand the language of landscape, to tease out its metaphors and syntax, to find “deeper insights” into its meaning. Her three photographs in this exhibition reveal not only her theories about the language of landscape and her eye for the ways in which Kamloops residents shape and cultivate their environment, but

her enduring interest in the garden as the site of a complex “dialogue” between nature and culture. Her interest in the connections between people and place – the connection inherent in the very word “landscape” – responds to similar ideas expressed in the CURA study and exhibition.

Gardens are profound expressions of human enterprise and longing, archetypal symbols of paradise, places in which we attempt to reconnect with the natural world from which it seems we have been expelled. In Western culture, gardens are associated with paradise, with The Garden of Eden, with biblical stories of Creation and The Fall; centuries ago, walled gardens were associated with Virgin Mary or courtly love. Our present-day yards and gardens may be places of refuge and solace, of nostalgia for a lost paradise, but they are also places in which natural elements are shaped, arranged, and enclosed. Gardens reveal not only cultural attitudes toward nature but also personal convictions and predilections. Anyone who weeds a flower bed, trims a hedge or mows a lawn is exerting a measure of control over his or her environment.

Looking at Spirn’s photos of North Shore yards and gardens, we take it as significant that a profusely blooming lilac bush has not seen pruning shears or years and is over-reaching the perimeters of the yard in which it was planted. We are curious about the orderliness and containment, and the unifying element of an unlikely colour throughout another North Shore setting: the conflation of the cerulean blue of the sky with the earthly forms of house, garden, and pick-up truck suggests, perhaps, an aspiration toward transcendence. Or perhaps it represents a reconciliation – of the terrestrial and the celestial, the secular and the sublime. We’re also intrigued by the sense of a secret garden, and by the dialogue between public and private, in a yard fenced and densely forested at its edges and planted, at its centre, with a old, eloquent weeping willow – the archetypal Tree of Life. If landscape is indeed a language, Spirn’s photographs tell us these gardens are a complex assemblage of narrative components, revealing truths both individual and universal.