

**“Interview with Anne Whiston Spirn,” *Penn in Ink*, Volume 3, No. 2, February 1994)**

Anne Whiston Spirn is Professor of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at GSFA and author of *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*, 1984 winner of the ASLA President’s Award of Excellence. Currently on leave from Penn, she is writing three books of her own and co-authoring or contributing to six more. She has also accepted invitations from the University of California Humanities Research Institute to be a 1994 Fellow in a six-month research seminar on “Reinventing Nature” and from the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC to be a guest scholar in urban studies this summer. Spirn took time from her demanding schedule to answer questions about her work and the profession of landscape architecture.

Q: How do you see your work in connection with what is going on in the field of landscape architecture today?

AWS: Landscape architecture is virtually unsung as a field. Everyone seems to know what architecture is by age six, but few people at any age have heard of landscape architecture. After I wrote *The Granite Garden*, I sat down and thought about what needed to be done in the field. I felt that too much of the theory being developed was borrowed from other fields rather than drawn from within the core of what's special about our profession. I decided that the place where I could make the greatest contribution over the next decade – this was in 1985 – was in academics, in writing and research. I also didn’t want to abandon practice completely, so I embarked on a series of practice projects from a university base – demonstration projects that pose and test hypotheses. That gave me an opportunity to return to my interest in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods, where I could contribute my expertise and use my university salary to subsidize work that no one would pay for at that time. When I told my plan to my father, who was a professor, he said, “Well, if you’re going to make a career in academics, you need your union card – your Ph.D.” I didn’t follow his advice. Instead of taking four to six years to do a Ph.D, I spent six years in practice, and I regard that as my PhD. I say that lightly, but I’m really very serious about it. Those six years in practice are fundamental to the kinds of research questions I ask and what interests me. I am driven to look at issues that will make the world better and will be useful to people who are planning and designing the landscapes around us. I’m not very interested in doing things that don't have direct applications, and I think my years in practice sensitized me to the kinds of constraints people work under in practice. If I’d spent those years in a Ph.D program instead of practicing, I wouldn’t have that basic knowledge.

Q: If academics must keep a hand in practice and teach full-time to become tenured, how can they possibly balance both?

AWS: I have several answers for that. The first is that there will always be a spectrum among faculty members. Some will be more interested in applied theory than others, so the balance of how much and how closely their work relates to practice will vary from one individual to another. However, I think that those of us who teach bear a responsibility to lead the profession. We have the luxury of time for reflection that people in practice

don't, and with that luxury comes the responsibility to reflect upon issues that are of great concern.

I think practice professorships are essential and I think we need to develop the concept of the research-oriented office. There are people who use their offices and the process of designing and constructing landscapes and buildings as a way to further knowledge about the field and the world. They're not in business to do formula landscapes over and over again, even though that kind of practice tends to be more profitable, especially in the short run. Instead I'm talking about a more thoughtful and inquisitive practice, where one asks difficult questions and tests hypotheses. After construction one can return to the place, evaluate how it is experienced and whether and how the questions were answered. This is a vital type of practice, but not a very profitable one. The people who practice this way are always taking risks and they're very often willing to spend the profits on more research. In these practices, a university salary, even if only half-time, gives some stability and enables practitioners to take the kinds of risks that benefit students, the profession, and society. Tenuring such people is exactly in the spirit of the tenure idea as it was originally put forward. It allows academics to take risks, to take on long-term projects that do not have short-term payoffs.

Q: What challenges currently face the profession of landscape architecture?

AWS: Society is struggling to redefine nature, and landscape architecture reflects this struggle. Many competing ideas about the nature of Nature coexist; they underlie whether and how we value and shape the landscape.

Landscape architects shape the landscape at multiple scales, from the garden to the region. This breadth poses a challenge, and the field has historically been pulled between the poles of design and planning, with some people trying to limit its scope to one or the other. I believe that this range in scope is fundamental to the discipline, one of the primary features that distinguishes it from related disciplines, such as architecture.

In addition, much of the great work of landscape architects is not seen as something that was designed. People tend to take the landscape around them for granted, and many of the landmarks of landscape architecture are assumed to be works of nature or chance. This presents a real dilemma for a profession that is fundamentally about shaping.

Another problem is that the great landscape plans and designs of the world are widely scattered, and photographs of landscapes rarely give you a sense of what a place is really like. You learn a lot by traveling through and experiencing landscapes that you simply can't learn from looking at photographs. Wouldn't it be marvelous for students to have travel fellowships to go see some of these places? Without visiting them, it's hard to gain an appreciation for how wonderful the field is and how phenomenal the places are that have been created.

Q: What made you decide to study Landscape Architecture when you originally came to Penn to study Art History?

AWS: When I look back on my life, I see landscape as a common thread from the time I was very young, exploring vacant land and woodlots. I went to college intending to major in art; it never occurred to me to ask whether Harvard had an art department. I arrived and found they had none, just Architectural Sciences and Fine Arts (art history). I ended up in art history studying sixteenth and seventeenth-century landscape painting. Later in my undergraduate career, Harvard introduced a program in Environmental and Visual Studies, and I took film and photography courses in my senior year. It was that year that I acquired my love for photography and an interest in anthropology. After college, Penn offered me a four-year doctoral fellowship in Art History. So I came to Penn planning to study the history of photography or primitive art in a program with the anthropology department. Then I ended up in James O'Gorman's seminar where I wrote a paper on Frederick Law Olmsted. I also saw Ian McHarg's video on public TV called "Multiply... and Subdue the Earth," and lo and behold, McHarg was here at Penn! His office was right upstairs because Art History used to be in Meyerson Hall. After one year, I moved from art history's seminar rooms in the basement to the landscape architecture studios on the third floor.

Q: Did you have mentors to guide you through these changes?

AWS: My father was a very strong mentor. One thing I admired about him was that he had degrees in five different disciplines and was able to synthesize material from all of them. It never occurred to me that you couldn't cross boundaries. I thought you could always change your field at any point in your life.

I had two important mentors during college – an art history professor named Linda Seidel and the poet Adrienne Rich, for whom I babysat. They were both very successful professionally and were wonderful, loving mothers. They had worked out ways of drawing boundaries between their families and their work and were willing to discuss how they juggled things. The fact that they could draw boundaries like that made it easier for me to conceive of how I could do the same, since it was never either/or for me.

Of course, once I left Art History and went into Landscape Architecture, Ian McHarg and Narendra Juneja were my two mentors.

Q: In what ways did Ian McHarg influence your development?

A: He had a tremendous influence! I worked with him at Wallace, McHarg, Roberts, and Todd (WMRT) for five years and was a student at Penn for three. That's eight years! When I was at WMRT, I worked almost exclusively on his projects. He had an ability to cut through irrelevant and peripheral issues and to understand the core of a problem. There was a cadre of folks who'd been his former students, and we formed a working group. He was completely supportive of us. On every job we seemed to push the boundaries of knowledge in the field. I have an understanding of what a research practice is because I am fortunate to have worked in one. Since he was a teacher and Chairman of the Department, Ian usually had just one job in the office at a time, and it was usually a

challenging one with complex problems. The solutions contributed to knowledge in the field and became resources for other practitioners and academics. Probably to his partners' dismay, Ian seemed more concerned with the research and the intellectual content than with making profits. I was lucky to work on one landmark project after another. When I began to feel that I wanted to have my own practice, make my own decisions and take my own risks, I had Ian in mind as a model. I saw how he had created a practice by writing *Design with Nature*. He was educating potential clients and establishing himself as the expert in the field. It was my experience at WMRT, and with Ian in particular, that led me to write *The Granite Garden*, and to write it for a general audience, not just as a text book.

Q: Now that you are no longer Chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, what is your role at Penn?

A: Now I get to teach! When I was Chairman, I taught only half-time, and every year, I'd have a terrible time deciding which of my courses to leave out. Now I'll be able to teach full-time. I want to teach undergraduates also, in Design of the Environment and Urban Studies; that really interests me.

Q: What would you say is the focus of all your activities?

A: Let me back into this. People have pushed me to pigeonhole myself, and I've resisted it always. In everything I do, I try to bring together everything I'm interested in and who I am as a person. Intellectually, I need to be gratified on multiple levels. I look for projects and activities that bring together my interests in art, in history, in making a contribution to the world, and in integrating bodily knowledge, experienced through the senses, and intellectual knowledge.

I was asked to give a seminar in 1985, when I was at Harvard, which gave me the opportunity to define where I saw my work going in the future. I described three streams. One was landscape design and planning theory. Another was art and photography. The third was urban design and advocacy planning in inner-city neighborhoods. This morning I was reflecting on that and feeling very good that now, nearly ten years later, I'm almost at the point I envisioned then. I'm writing three books and each one emphasizes a different stream at the same time that it fuses all three. *The Language of Landscape*, now almost complete, is based on the premise that landscape embodies a language. It addresses landscape design theory and brings in my background in art history, practice, education, and teaching. *Reflective Landscapes*, which will be completed in 1995, draws from 15 years of my own color photographs and journal texts. *Landscapes of Community: The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan* proposes an approach to urban design and planning that promotes incremental, grassroots projects and accommodates large-scale public works. It comes full-circle from my master's thesis at Penn in the early 1970s, a landscape plan for Powelton Village, done with Heidi Cooke Shusterman (MLA '74). I also enjoy collaboration. Six other books are with colleagues from different disciplines. One book, with historians William Cronon and Richard White, among others, explores a "redefinition" of nature. Two are on cities: one for the Woodrow Wilson Center on

American regionalism and urban planning; another for the OECD on future urban policy and development. The remaining three are on landscape and garden history: the work of C.Th. Sørensen, with Sven-Ingvar Andersson and Sten Høyer; the restorative garden, with historian Sam Bass Warner, physician Richard Kaufman, and the photographer Marie Cosindas; the buildings and landscapes of Frank Lloyd Wright with David De Long and others.

Increasingly, I find myself in conversations and activities that take me outside the profession of landscape architecture into a larger dialogue. The knowledge of the landscape architect is now in great demand in society at large. It is received with appreciation and admiration. People in other fields – arts and sciences, government, even other design arts – are discovering our field. We have a completely different perspective to bring to the table in discussions with other actors. And to borrow an old expression, “It absolutely blows their minds!”