

Tensions of Change: A Conversation with Anne Whiston Spirn

By Laura Muthler White

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Anne Whiston Spirn, professor of landscape architecture and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has traveled the world, studying, photographing, and writing about landscapes. She has also devoted nearly twenty years to working with the schoolchildren and residents of West Philadelphia, teaching them to read and to shape the landscapes of their own urban neighborhoods. She is artist, scholar, critic, designer, and the author of two books, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (Basic Books, 1984) and *The Language of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1998). She is currently at work on her third book, *The Eye Is a Door*, which will feature her color photography as well as her essays. Anne lives in Nahant, Massachusetts, at the end of a mile-long causeway reaching out into Massachusetts Bay. I phoned her at her home on a stormy Friday evening in July of 2003.

LMW: I'd like to begin with a question about your methods. I'm really curious, when you arrive in a place how do you see it? What are you aware of? How do you experience a brand new place?

*AWS: I've been thinking about that a lot because the book I'm writing now, *The Eye Is a Door*, is about seeing as a way of discovery and an art and about photography as a form of inquiry as well as a medium of expression. A lot of what I can see in a new place is based on the experience of having seen many different places. I look for pattern. I look for a combination of overall structural pattern in the physiography or topography as well as in the patterns of where plants are and how the human settlement—the paths, road systems, particularly the infrastructure—relates to the structure of landform and plant communities. And then I look for anomalies, things that stick out as different from the overall pattern. And that leads me to ask a series of questions: Why is the pattern the way it is? What accounts for the anomalies? I generally don't think about this verbally, at first, but start deliberately by thinking visually, with a camera.*

LMW: Really?

AWS: "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera." Photographer Dorothea Lange said that. That's how I use photography, as a disciplined way of seeing. The frame brings features in the landscape into dialogue with one another. What's in the center? What's in the corners? That leads me to see things that I otherwise might not see. The frame also makes me aware of horizontals, verticals, and diagonals, and when the lines in the landscape are in tension or not. That's how I begin. And then, in photographing, you often have to wait for light, or it starts raining, so I always have both my camera and my journal with me. At a certain point I'll sit down and sketch a plan of the area I've been looking at, and then I'll just start writing, almost free associating about what I've been seeing. Usually the writing raises some questions and leads me to see some things I hadn't seen in the photographing, and I pick up the camera again. So it's a process of going back and forth between seeing and writing.

The discipline of photography serves much the same purpose that the discipline of poetry does. For example, I am writing the captions for the photographs in my book as haiku because that's akin to the way I use the camera, as a condensed telling. The haiku's seventeen syllables, the break, the twist in meaning, and the seasonal reference impose demands much like those I apply in my photography. Visual thinking and verbal thinking call on different parts of the brain. They work really well together if you use each for the kind of thinking it's best at. I use a phrase in this book: From perception and observation to discovery, idea, and transcendence: the eye is a door, photography is its frame, words a way to focus further. Although I have to admit that I'm a visual thinker first. Words are like a translation for me.

LMW: When did you start photography? When did you take that up?

AWS: I remember entering some photographs in a hobby show as a child and getting a ribbon. When I went to college, I intended to major in Art and then found out that Harvard didn't have an art department! So I ended up in Art History and was steeped in the study of images and in the drawing I was doing outside of the classroom. Before coming to college, I had been torn between being an artist or a poet, but then was intimidated by classmates at Radcliffe who were already published poets. My poetry seemed unsophisticated in comparison, so I figured maybe I wasn't going to be a poet! The summer after my sophomore year, I was working at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and there were times when I not only lost the will and way to write poetry, but literally was without words to speak.

LMW: Because you were only thinking visually?

AWS: Because the visual thinking was so intense. That summer I started photographing in a serious way, in color, as a way of understanding what it was that I was seeing and how, and to gain control of a thought process. I returned to Harvard that fall and found there was, indeed, a color photography course, but it required a full year of black and white photography first. And there were over 200 students applying for fifteen places in the introductory course. I never got in, though I tried every year. Those courses were so oversubscribed. Finally I managed to get admitted into a course at Harvard summer school after I graduated. That was black and white photography, but it gave me the knowledge I needed to proceed on my own. Now, all these years later, I'm finally able to print my own color photographs, and it does give me the kinds of insights I had hoped for more than thirty years ago.

LMW: Something that you address in your book is the importance of local knowledge. I'm wondering how one can develop local knowledge in a transient culture. If you live in one place for three years, then move to another place, then move to another place— can you develop local knowledge if you don't know a place for ten, twenty years?

AWS: It's possible to develop local knowledge very quickly. I always look for a local bookstore. If it's a college town, the university bookstore usually has a good section on things local. I look for maps and books that will help me interpret what I'm seeing. They

may not be explicit tour guides, they might be histories that are about more than just people and events, which describe pivotal processes that shaped the landscape. I usually won't buy a book on specific plants unless I'm going to be living in a place for a while, or unless, in photographing, I realize that there are a few key species that I need to understand because they're keys to the overall pattern. I always look for a book on local geology, always look to see if there's a geography book on the place.

Typically I'll take a suitcase full of books with me and come home with more, anywhere from a half-dozen to a dozen books, including novels or poetry grounded in the region. I took Seamus Heaney's poetry and prose with me to Ireland; they were wonderful guides to reading landscape, and the poems took on a whole new dimension when read in place. Then I came home with the *Atlas of the Irish Landscape* and with books on the political murals of Belfast and Derry. When I went to Australia, I came back with shelf-loads of books! The same with Japan. Often you can only find such books in the place itself because they're so particular to the landscape there.

AWS: Looking at old atlases and maps, comparing them across time to see the way a place evolved is also a great way to gain local knowledge. In the process of doing that, I develop questions and then find someone who can answer them for me: a historian, a geologist or geographer, or someone who has lived in the place for a long time. A good way to start a conversation with someone who has knowledge about a place is to have a series of specific questions about anomalies you've noticed or patterns you don't understand: how did this get to be the way it is? has this always been this way? how did that happen? People love to talk about what they know. Often, if I start off with questions about puzzles that I've noticed, then I'll hear a whole lot more.

I find my way to the kinds of places I wrote about in *The Language of Landscape* not just by happening upon them through blind luck. I usually do some research before going somewhere to find out if there are particularly interesting or special places. Or I ask people. When I say, "I'm interested in such and such," people will say, "Well you really ought to see this place or that place." It's really easy to gather local knowledge. It doesn't just have to be from—

LMW: *Experience or years?*

AWS: Yes, but it does help to go through more than one season in a place, though one can't always do that.

LMW: *How have your writings addressed the broad question of how we make/adapt/degrade the landscapes we live in?*

AWS: Fundamentally, they've all addressed the definition of landscape, which Webster's and the Oxford English Dictionary have wrong. Landscape is not a word that first came into English in the seventeenth-century as a painting term from the Dutch. *Landscape* was a word in Old English, related to the same word in the Nordic languages. It may have gotten lost, then reintroduced into English again in the seventeenth century. Going back

to the Nordic roots provides a much more important way to think about landscape. Landscape as defined by Webster's and the OED is from the painting term: scenery taken in in a single view. But landscape is much deeper than that. It's a partnership between people and place. This meaning is embodied in the old English and Nordic roots of the word: *land*, on the one hand, which means both territory and nation, and on the other hand, in German for example, *schaffen*, or *-schaft*. *Schaffen* is to shape and *-schaft* denotes a form of association, like the English suffix *-ship*. And so you get this notion of landscape as an association of all who are mutually shaping this place, this territory. That's how I've always written about landscape, not only as something to look at, but as something shaped by the people living in it. And not only by people, but by all the natural processes taking place there, including the shaping activities of other organisms.

LMW: So if we misunderstand the word "landscape," is there any other word we have in English that we're using that comes close, or approximates that?

AWS: People have asked, "Why don't you use the words environment or place instead of landscape?" "Environment" distances. It doesn't *include* us humans. It's what we're in or what's around us—as opposed to what we're part and parcel of. Place is a really important word, a positioning in space, but it doesn't have the rich associations that the word landscape does. Landscape has an aesthetic connotation, which environment does not, nor does place. Humans and human culture are inseparable from a landscape, as are other organisms. It's the only word that encompasses all the allusions and meanings in the concepts I write about. One mission of *The Language of Landscape* is to help recover that word, in all its dimensions, for the English language.

LMW: Let's talk about the word "nature."

AWS: That's a tough one.

LMW: It's something that you talk about in your book and if we're going to talk about words—

AWS: Well, let's start with Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, a terrific book that examines a number of key words in the English language, their etymology, how they've been used over time, what each word connotes, and the ideological nuances one should be aware of when using it. Of the more than one hundred words Williams chose as key, Nature is the one he calls the most complex word in the English language. It has the same root as "native" and "nation." It's a very, very difficult word embodying many ideas, which have changed over time. People tend to read authors of the 19th century and early 20th century and think that nature had the same meanings and connotations then as it does today, but it didn't! I now try to use "nature" only when no other word will serve, try always to look for another word first. It's so easy to fall into using the word loosely, and the problem with that is, if you get ten people in a room, they will likely have ten different definitions of nature and won't even be aware that they are using the word differently. So, if the purpose of language is communication, it's not a very good word. The one way that it's used today that really bugs me is the use of the word nature as a place.

LMW: Like, “Let’s go out into nature!”

AWS: Nature is not a place! It’s an idea! A farm is a place, so is a forest. The Atlantic Ocean is a place. Boston is a place. Nature is not a place, it’s an idea. When someone says, they are “going out to nature,” they usually mean that they are going to the countryside and rarely, if ever, mean that they are going to visit a city, although cities are part of the natural world, too. Natural processes do not stop operating at city limits. All of my work in one way or another is about problems of blindness. And a word like nature can really prevent people from seeing what’s right under their nose.

Nature is an extremely important word, but one to be used very carefully. It should be treated like a bomb. In a seminar, it can be explosive. Sixteen years ago, I taught a seminar on Archetypes of the Natural Landscape, which included students in landscape architecture and architecture. Terribly emotional arguments broke out, the likes of which I’d never encountered in any of my years in teaching. I finally realized that they stemmed from the fact that different students were using the word nature to mean entirely different things, that these personal definitions were unexamined and unstated, and that they stemmed from very, very deep values closely related to each student’s identity, in some cases to their religious beliefs. Since then, I ask students on the first day of class—before I speak about the subject—to write for me their personal definition of nature. At our next meeting, I report back to the class on the range of their definitions and ask them to recognize and respect that different people have different values and beliefs, which definitions of nature inevitably reflect. This has prevented the problem encountered in the first year teaching that subject; the discussions may be heated, but they are rational and respectful.

LMW: *So in your writing, in your work, do you try to jar those deeply held meanings and get people to change the way they think, or do you just let sleeping dogs lie?*

AWS: At first, I didn’t realize there were any sleeping dogs! I wrote *The Granite Garden* to inspire people to think about cities as part of the natural world and to change the way cities are designed and built. In 1984, there was so much information about natural processes in cities, which most people didn’t know about, and I thought it was just a matter of presenting it. The book got a terrific readership. It has been influential, has been out almost twenty years and is still in print, but I don’t think it fundamentally *changed* anyone’s mind. It helped people who were already predisposed to think about cities as part of nature; it gave them a way to think about things related to the values they already held. But the folks who believe that humans are despoilers who degrade the natural world by their very presence, that nature is everything that is not human, and that the city is an unnatural, degraded place—I don’t think I changed their opinions. Even after a whole semester in a class with me, students don’t change their basic values about nature. Originally, I failed to account for how deeply held these ideas of nature are, and it took the various reactions to the first book to make me realize those sleeping dogs were there.

With *The Language of Landscape*, I decided to be provocative. There was no way to avoid it. When people asked about the book I was writing, my reply that it was about a

language of landscape hit a raw nerve with some folks. They would look at me and say, “Language is NOT landscape, CANNOT be—LANGUAGE IS WORDS!” I decided to put statements by various people right up at the front of the book, in order to signal that I was aware that the ideas are controversial. I wanted to just hit it head on.

LMW: What I’m wondering is, on the back of your book, it says if the language of landscape was a movement, you would be its leader.

AWS: [Laughs.]

LMW: Do you consider yourself leading a movement? Or do you see yourself carrying on a legacy, working in a legacy that others have begun?

AWS: I am definitely working in a tradition with a rich legacy and am aware of having lots of intellectual debts. On the other hand, I’m not aware of anyone else who’s gone out on the limb to claim that, if people express their values and ideas through making landscapes, then landscape is not just symbolic, it is a form of language. I backed into the language issue through a desire to write about an aesthetic of landscape design and planning that addressed ecological issues and the interplay between human well-being and the health of the larger environment.

The desire to do so grew out of a strong split in landscape architecture in the early 80s between ecology and art, which still exists today, but to a much lesser extent. On the one side were folks who were concerned about ecological design and planning, on the other were folks interested in landscape and gardens as an art form—and they practically weren’t speaking to one another! When they did speak, they practically screamed at one each other. Go back and read the letters to the editor in *Landscape Architecture* magazine in the 80s, and you’ll find these screaming matches. I had always considered myself an artist *and* someone who was concerned with environmental issues, as well as humane issues of social responsibility. To me, these polarities were ridiculous and tragic. So I wrote my first book, *The Granite Garden*, out of a concern for human health, safety, and welfare, for environmental quality, and with the conviction that viewing cities as part of the natural world, rather than separate from it, would inspire a new aesthetic for urban design. I was puzzled and annoyed when the book was read by some design-as-art people as being about health, safety, and welfare, but NOT about art or aesthetics! So I decided in my next book to explore the aesthetics implied in the first.

In 1984, I started writing “The Poetics of City and Nature: A New Aesthetic for Urban Design,” an article published in 1988. By the time it came out, I was already questioning my use of the word poetics and had moved from poetics to language. Poetics is rhetorical and figurative expression. How can there be poetics without language? Thinking about rhetorical expression, about metaphor and irony and paradox, made me realize I was dealing with language. And that led me to ask, if there’s a language, then what are the elements of the language? What’s the grammar? What are the pragmatics? What are the polemical statements and arguments expressed in landscape language? What are the

kinds of conversations that might be possible as a result of recognizing landscape as language?

LMW: Let me ask you this question, because you've been talking about it: In what ways does your writing and making engage the tensions that arise from competing interests, the sustainable agriculture movement versus traditional agriculture, watershed conservation versus economic development, other perceived dualisms?

AWS: The conservation of an urban watershed and the economic development of an inner-city community—those are two issues directly addressed by my West Philadelphia Project. I wrote *The Granite Garden* in the early 1980s and began the West Philadelphia Landscape Project in 1987 as a way of demonstrating the fallacy of dualisms between city and nature, ecology and art, theory and practice, of perceived conflict between the social obligation to protect the well-being of the human community and the responsibility to promote environmental quality. When I was first studying landscape architecture, some of my friends who were activists engaged in social justice issues criticized me for entering a profession concerned with the environment—this was before there was a movement called environmental justice. My response was, “Don’t you understand? It’s all tied up together!” Later, after I wrote *The Granite Garden*, some of my colleagues said, “I can understand how you could apply these ideas to designing a new community, but what about existing cities? They’re already built.” I started the West Philadelphia Landscape Project and wrote *The Language of Landscape* to disprove these dualisms.

The West Philadelphia Landscape Project was also a laboratory for testing ideas about the language of landscape. If landscape is a language, then it has to be meaningful and useful to ordinary people, not just to designers. Language enables vernacular expression as well as literature.

But these are only a few of the many dualisms set up by culture. Another is mind and body.

LMW: Really?

AWS: The dualism between body and mind, the real and the ideal, practice and theory, they’re all related. You may find the same people who distrust the body might be the ones who are more likely to distrust practice, as opposed to theory, and vice versa. Theory and practice is a dualism that plagues architecture, landscape architecture, and planning. In design and planning schools, there is more and more pressure for professors to have a Ph.D. Given the demands of time, many or most folks who get a doctorate and then go on to teach have never practiced. There’s a growing disconnect between people in practice who are desperate for theory that’s relevant and valuable to practice, which can give practitioners a framework within which make decisions day to day. Much of my work is devoted to breaking down that dualism between practice and theory. I employ theory to frame and guide practice and use practice to generate, test, and refine theory. Generalizing from experiences in practice gives me more insight and perspective on my

actions in the world. It's so destructive to the professions, to the world, to separate theory and practice, learning and doing, thinking and acting.

LMW: So building on what you just said about your writing informing your practice, what do you think the role of language—poetry, narrative, prose—can play in revealing our collective making and unmaking of cultural and natural landscapes?

AWS: The role of language is utterly key. This goes back to our discussion of the meaning of the words landscape and nature. It's so important to use language deliberately and plainly. Language is a way of thinking more clearly and of thinking collectively; that's as true of landscape language as it is for verbal language. When writing is obscure, it doesn't advance either communication or knowledge, and it can lead to all kinds of misunderstandings. Writing, for me, is first and foremost a personal discipline—a way of moving from muddled thoughts to clear ideas. I write to know what I think. I also write for colleagues, whose work fuels my writing. I'm mad at some of them and want to argue with them, and I love others and want to celebrate their work and extend the ideas we share. Finally, I write for a larger audience, to engage in a public conversation about the issues I believe are important. Writing is particularly critical for a profession like landscape architecture where the form of expression is usually visual and tangible, rather than verbal. It's crucial that some of us write, both to advance knowledge within the field and so that our profession and its significance are better understood.

*LMW: I remember you said in one place in *The Language of Landscape*, about how sometimes the work that a landscape architect does might be seen as a natural occurrence; the work is hidden and you don't even know that someone designed it!*

AWS: Yes, exactly. That's a problem. But wouldn't it be terrible if, because of that, landscape architects stopped designing things that look like they could have been accidents of nature? That's what some landscape architects started doing in the 60s; they stopped using plants and used a lot of concrete and rock instead.

LMW: So, it's like, "Look what I did!"

AWS: There's a need for things that look deliberately constructed, but there are places where it's not appropriate to make something that hits people over the head with the fact that it's been constructed. It's a matter of public education. And it's why the definition and careful use of words like nature and landscape are so important. So that people don't think that humans are only despoilers, that humans can only ruin the natural world or step back from it and protect it, that they can't create in partnership with natural processes.

LMW: Is that a common misperception that you run into?

AWS: Yes.

LMW: Do you see that coming from across the board, or do you see that coming from certain groups?

AWS: The ideas that cities are unnatural and that human presence inevitably degrades “pristine” natural environments do come from certain groups, but those groups are diverse. I can pick up a newspaper any day and find examples of those ideas – *every single day*. I hear a conversation every single day with a reference that comes from that perspective. People don’t realize how endemic it is. It’s very destructive because it prevents people from thinking how creative we can be, as humans, in making places that are healthy ecologically, whether in the countryside or in cities and other densely settled places.

LMW: *Do you have any ideas about why that is endemic, where that idea came from?*

AWS: It goes back to what someone’s basic idea of humanity is—whether humans are inevitably flawed in a very deep way, whether humans are degraded or evil.

LMW: *Like original sin?*

AWS: Yes, or whether one has a more benign view of humans. What I’ve learned from years of teaching, having students write their personal definition of nature is that this view of the place of humanity in the world and the nature of a person varies so much from individual to individual. How one views the role of humanity in the natural world is probably due not only to religious beliefs, but to family and cumulative experience. I was brought up with a sort of transcendental philosophy, with a sense that humans are part of the natural world, and that people are fundamentally good. I’m not a Pollyanna—I get pretty upset at humanity— but I have this deep-seated notion of hope rather than despair, of wanting to help make the world better rather than despairing.

LMW: *Why do you write about landscape and place the way you do? Why not some alternative venue? Why are human places important enough to you to be a primary theme in your life’s work?*

AWS: But I don’t primarily write about human places. Perhaps there is a bit of dualism – of opposing city and nature – underlying that question; I write about cities as human places, but also as places where natural organisms live and natural processes operate. I always try to write *across* the human and non-human. Again, that is why I use the word landscape as opposed to environment, because I want the human embedded, as opposed to separate. The reason I chose landscape architecture as a profession is because it’s large enough to encompass all of my interests, particularly if one defines landscape, as I do, as a partnership between a place and all those who dwell there.

LMW: *Do you think Americans are illiterate in the language of landscape?*

AWS: Absolutely. I think Americans are visually illiterate, in general, a statement which always startles people, who say, “Oh, but we’re such a visual culture! Everything is visual! All

the kids are watching TV!” But they’re not learning to *think* visually—they’re being entertained. Most people have a very short attention span for really observing, for looking carefully at things. They want to look at the scenery and move on, hit the high spots. Most can only read the most obvious in the landscape around them; they’re not able to see subtle pattern. I am stunned by how little my students see, at the beginning of the semester, and how few have ever been asked to use systematic observation of the world around them as a form of evidence from which to develop a hypothesis and construct an argument. And these are MIT undergrads, very bright kids. The first assignments ask them to go out and look at a neighborhood and glean information through their eyes, then to compare a series of historical maps in order to figure out how the place has evolved over time and what processes— natural, social, economic, political— have shaped it. The research is done through looking at primary documents, the place itself and old maps, not by reading secondary sources about the particular place itself. The required readings are general texts, a source of background information from which to draw. I tell them that I am more concerned about what they see and their reasoning than whether or not their conclusions are correct. Despite many classes devoted to learning how to look at and analyze the urban landscape, most find the process very difficult. The book I’m writing now is a plea, an argument for the importance of seeing and an invitation to develop the power of observation.

LMW: If there’s one collective realization or epiphany you’d like your readers to achieve, what might it be?

AWS: I want to influence *how* and *what* people see and, on the basis of that seeing, how they act. I want to inspire them to read the messages whispered and shouted and sung in the landscapes around them, to cast off the blinders that dualisms impose, to make connections among seemingly unrelated things, to recognize and seize opportunities where they may now see only problems. If my writing could help achieve that, it would make me very happy.