

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

Biography

Anne Whiston Spirn is an award-winning author and distinguished landscape architect, photographer, teacher, and scholar. Her work is devoted to promoting life-sustaining communities: places that are functional, sustainable, meaningful, and artful, places that help people feel and understand the relationship of the natural and built worlds.

Spirn, a professor of landscape architecture and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is the author of three books: *The Granite Garden*; *The Language of Landscape*; and *Daring to Look*. *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (1984) describes nature in cities and what the city could be like if designed in concert with natural processes, rather than in ignorance of them or in outright opposition. *The Language of Landscape* (1998), extends these ideas; it argues that landscape is a form of language with its own grammar and metaphors, and that we endanger ourselves by failing to learn and use this language. *Daring to Look* (2008) presents photographs and reports from the field by the great photographer Dorothea Lange in 1939 and reflects on how the dynamics she saw and recorded in the Great Depression are still shaping American lives and landscapes. Spirn has also written a series of essays that explore how ideas of nature and community have influenced great planners and designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Ian McHarg.

Since 1987, Spirn has directed the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, an action research program integrating research, teaching and community service, which was cited as a Model of Best Practice at a 1999 White House summit for leading scholars and artists in public life. Spirn's book-in-progress, *Top-Down/Bottom-Up: Rebuilding the Landscape of Community*, describes this research-in-action and its lessons for building safer, healthier, and more equitable and sustainable communities.

In the 1970s, Spirn worked as a landscape architect and planner in professional practice at Wallace McHarg Roberts and Todd in Philadelphia on projects ranging from plans for an entire region to a single city to designs for parks. Several of these won awards, and some, like Woodlands, Texas and Sanibel, Florida, are considered landmarks. Spirn was on the faculty of Harvard University from 1979 to 1986, then moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where she succeeded Ian McHarg as chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning. She has been at MIT since 2000. In addition to teaching, Spirn lectures widely in the US and abroad at colleges and universities, as a keynote speaker at conferences, and for organizations like the League of Women Voters.

Spirn was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and lived in Denmark for a year as an American Field Service exchange student. She graduated with honors from Radcliffe College, where she studied art history, and received her master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. She has received numerous fellowships and awards including the Guggenheim Fellowship and the President's Award of Excellence from the American Society of Landscape Architects. Her work as a whole has been honored on two occasions. In 2002, she was one of two finalists for the National Design Award in environmental design. In 2001, she received the International Cosmos Prize for "contributions to the harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind."

Spirn has one adult son. She and her husband live near Boston.