Anne Whiston Spirn

National Design Award 2018
ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

Ten Projects

National Design Award 2018

Design Mind
Whatever impact my ideas have had on design theory and practice, on public policy and public awareness has been achieved through several media. Tens of thousands of readers have bought my books, but that number has been augmented by millions of people from more than 90 countries who have visited my websites to view and download material—writings, maps, videos, course syllabi. This portfolio book contains ten projects that place my published books in the context of this larger body of work, including essays, experimental demonstration projects, and innovative use of the Web.
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Anne Whiston Spirn

STATEMENT

Human survival depends upon adapting ourselves and our landscapes—cities, buildings, and gardens, roadways and rivers—in new, life-sustaining ways, designing places that are functional, sustainable, meaningful, and artful, places that help us feel and understand the relationship of the natural and the built. I want to transform the way people see the world, to inspire them to create places that enhance life. My career as author, scholar, teacher, practitioner, and activist is dedicated to this goal.

Design is for me the habit of looking for opportunities where others see problems and then devising solutions that address seemingly unrelated concerns, such as polluted water, impoverished neighborhoods, and troubled schools.

Action is at the heart of my work. I use design practice to develop and test theory, and theory to critique practice, alternating between engagement and reflection. As a scholar, I document the design tradition within which I think and act.

BIOGRAPHY

Anne Whiston Spirn is an award-winning landscape architect, author, photographer, and teacher. Her books include The Granite Garden (1984), The Language of Landscape (1998), Daring to Look (2008), and The Eye Is a Door (2014). Spirn is Professor of Landscape Architecture at MIT and previously taught at Penn and Harvard. Prior to teaching, Spirn worked at Wallace McHarg Roberts and Todd on landmark projects, including Woodlands New Community and the Toronto Central Waterfront. Since 1987, she has directed the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, which integrates research, design practice, teaching, and community service. In 2001, she was awarded Japan’s International Cosmos Prize, “for contributions to the harmonious coexistence of nature and humankind.”
For more than forty years, Anne Whiston Spirn has been a visionary and an innovator as an educator, author, designer, scholar, artist, and public intellectual in the fields of landscape architecture, urban design and planning, and photography.

Her first book, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (1984), launched the field of ecological urbanism and spoke to the general public about nature in cities and the role of design. In 1985, she devised a bold plan to expand, renovate, and integrate urban open space in order to detain storm water, stop the overflow of combined sewers, and thus to simultaneously improve regional water quality and rebuild communities. In her manifesto of 1988, “The Poetics of City and Nature,” Spirn challenged designers to embrace dynamic form, integrate ecology and art, and reclaim urban infrastructure as a domain for design. In Philadelphia, 20 years of Spirn’s teaching, writing, and design proposals for the integration of open space and water management inspired Green City, Clean Waters, a $2 billion program launched by the City in 2009, now hailed as a national model.

Spirn’s institutional base has been the university, where she has educated and inspired generations of architects, landscape architects, and urban designers and planners. But her theater of action has been the urban landscape as a whole and the inner-city neighborhood in particular. Since 1987, in the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, Spirn has developed an internationally recognized model for community-based design research. The project was also a laboratory for generating, testing, and refining the theory of a design language equally applicable to design by masters and by ordinary people. Her second book, *The Language of Landscape* (1998), which integrates the insights of a practitioner and scholar, is a key text in landscape theory, and the book has had broad influence in fields outside design, from history to choreography to poetry.

Visual thinking drives Spirn’s research. Her innovative use of photography as a form of inquiry introduced new methods to design- and arts-based research. Her insights as a practitioner-scholar have overturned misconceptions about the work of masters of design and photography.

Spirn is a champion of open access to information. She writes for a general audience as well as for designers. She pioneered the use of the Web as a design medium for education and advocacy, and her award-winning websites offer free access to her research, publications, and courses.

In the best tradition of design, Anne Whiston Spirn looks for the interrelatedness of multiple problems and synergistic solutions. She embodies the design mind, which she has made broadly available to students, colleagues, officials, and the general public. She and her work are best evaluated by distinguished leaders in and observers of the design arts in the following pages.
Testimonials

“I consider Anne the most important theorist of landscape architecture in the United States of the past 40 years, both in terms of the quality of her work and its influence.
The Granite Garden... pioneered the field of landscape urbanism by examining the role of natural ecosystems in urban design. This study continues to influence the development of this important field today, which is at the forefront of professional practice. The Language of Landscape... set forth the essential categories for the analysis of both natural and designed landscapes, categories that continue to influence the teaching of landscape architecture... and the way professionals conceive and evaluate their own work. What makes her work so influential... is her ability to synthesize natural and social science with aesthetics, much in the mode of John Dewey, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and Charles Eliot.”

REUBEN RAINNEY
Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

—

“As one of our country’s leading design thinkers, Anne Spirn... has a global reputation as the preeminent scholar working at the intersection of landscape architecture and environmental planning. Her seminal scholarly research and elegant writing applies ecological principles to urban settings, and she has also developed a parallel community-based research agenda that has gained national and international attention. Her work creatively bridges across design, community and economic development, and environmental policy. She has been exceptionally effective in conveying her ideas to a broader public, both through web design and her insistence on open access publication.”

LAWRENCE VALE
Professor of Urban Design and Planning, MIT
“Taken together, as a related body of work, *The Granite Garden*, the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, and *The Language of Landscape* have no equal in value and significance to the city-building professions.... Anne was preoccupied with the ecological health of cities and well-being of disadvantaged communities at a time when prominent academics and practitioners were not. Her emphasis on the poetics of design as an integral aspect of urban health, too, preceded mainstream practice.”

**Ignacio Bunster**
Principal, AECOM

—

“**The most impressive aspect of Anne’s accomplishments has been the amazing diversity of disciplines in which she has excelled**—including scholarship, design literature, teaching and, in professional practice, urban design, planning and landscape architecture. She has... been a leader in the fusion of teaching and practice. Anne has been a major force in humanizing the cityscape with a quality of innovation that is economical, subtle, rational and infinitely satisfying.”

**James Wines**
President of SITE

—

“**As a guide to a coherent, intricate and transformative approach to landscape architecture and urban design, Anne Whiston Spirn is a visionary of the first order** whose innovative work on the ground has transformed and enhanced the quality of life in low-income urban neighborhoods in deep and lasting ways.”

**Charlotte Kahn**
Boston Foundation
“Over the past three decades Anne has been the world’s preeminent educator, theorist, and public figure in the field of landscape architecture. She is a major intellectual force who has changed the way the world regards the role of nature in cities, enhanced the quality for all who live in them ... [and] changed the way that an entire generation of landscape architects and planners think about design.”

Alan Berger
Professor of Urban Design and Landscape Architecture, MIT

“Spirn’s voice as a designer and scholar has reached far beyond the university and the professional design community ... to the broad public. Like Rachel Carson and Jane Jacobs, she has made specialized information compelling to diverse audiences and played an important role as an environmental educator. At a time when landscape literacy is an urgent matter, her ability to speak to so many people makes her a powerful advocate for design.

My work — and the trajectory of my entire generation of landscape and urban designers and scholars — would not have taken its current direction without Spirn’s contributions. Her integration of practice and theory, her intellectual rigour, her innovative subjects, and her generosity as a scholar have made her a model, a mentor, and an inspiration for our discipline.”

Jane Wolff
Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto

“It was through her groundbreaking work that the City of Philadelphia can now boast being the Greenest City in America.”

Howard Neukrug
Commissioner, Philadelphia Water Department
“The legacies of Anne’s acclaimed practice and scholarship inhabit cities across the United States. Some are the result of her own labors in Philadelphia and Boston, but others are the steady accretion of her ideas: creeks liberated from concrete culverts in Seattle, verdant bikeways in Denver, urban gardens in Chicago and Detroit. An entire generation of scholars, planners, designers, environmental activists and urban leaders have benefitted from Anne’s visionary and courageous leadership. Her lasting mark upon the landscape of American urban design is as indelible as it is inclusive.

I sit on the editorial board of Environmental History, the field’s foremost journal. Every year, legions of scholars cite Anne’s work in their articles — a testament to her influence beyond architecture and planning. Her work elevates the value of design for people previously unaware of its importance and ubiquity.”

MATTHEW KLINGLE
Professor of History and Environmental Studies, Bowdoin College

“I consider Spirn...one of the greatest thinkers and artists of our time. Spirn’s abilities, through her artistry, design, teaching and scholarship, to create bridges between the ecological, cultural, ethical, technological, spiritual, philosophical and poetic aspects of human experience... place her in the rare category of world-leading thinkers and designers/artists.”

CHRIS AIKEN
Choreographer, Director of MFA Program, Smith College
In 1984, I published *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*, a book that demonstrates how cities can be designed in concert with natural processes rather than in conflict. Since then I have applied this approach to the redesign of existing cities, seeking integrated solutions to environmental and social challenges. I have worked in real neighborhoods with real people to build real projects, have had successes and failures and have made surprising discoveries. This action research was a laboratory for my second book, *The Language of Landscape* argues that landscape is a form of language with its own grammar and metaphors and calls for changing the way we shape our environment.

In recognition of this body of work, I was awarded Japan's International Cosmos Prize in 2001 for “contributions to the harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind.”
Artist Misaki Hisatani designed this case for my Cosmos Medal with a motif that recognizes specific themes of my work: life, water, and time.
International Cosmos Prize

In 2001, I received the International Cosmos Prize from Japan for “contributions to the harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind” for my life’s work. The Cosmos Prize, established in 1992, was conceived as the “Nobel Prize” for the environment with a generous monetary award. I was the youngest person, the first woman, and am the only designer/planner to receive the award.

The Cosmos Prize Foundation described the grounds for this recognition:

Professor Spirn’s basic principal... has been that cities must not conflict with nature: it is possible to build a city that is harmonious with the natural environment around it, existing as part of nature. Based on this principle, she wrote and published a remarkable book, The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design, in 1984. This publication won international attention in that it shed a new light on the relationship between urban areas and natural environment.

In 1998, she published another noteworthy book entitled The Language of Landscape. She emphasizes that it is important to catch and understand what individual landscapes can tell us, so that mankind can sustain and create beautiful environments through better interactions with nature. This is a new approach for studying the relationship between nature and mankind.

She has directed various projects around the world. Since 1987, she has directed the West Philadelphia Landscape Project which is highly evaluated as one of the best practices of urban planning in the U.S.

Consistently underlying all of her achievements is her philosophy, ‘urban areas harmoniously coexisting with nature,’ and new approaches aiming at the integration of nature, urban areas, and art. These achievements, in agreement with ‘Harmonious Coexistence of Nature and Mankind,’ the concept of the Cosmos Prize, have contributed to the future of human society in the 21st century.
THE GRANITE GARDEN
Urban Nature and Human Design
ANNE WHISTON SPIRN
The Granite Garden

“If you care about cities, as they are or as they might be, don’t miss The Granite Garden. I am filled with admiration for this book—for its truly remarkable practicality, its uncommon precision, its unique scope and sweep. Fascinating reading for anyone, this is required reading for professionals. It is also an invaluable reference work. Never before has anyone pulled together such a wide range of environmental information and applied it in a coherent and practical way to the situation of the city. At the end of her book, the author offers us something of a utopia, but, unlike earlier visions of the city, hers seems possible. Anne Whiston Spirn has made a splendid contribution and here emerges as a leading spokesperson for the city.”

JANE JACOBS, author of The Death and Life of Great American Cities

The Granite Garden “touched off the ecological urbanism movement,” according to the American Planning Association. The Granite Garden is a book about 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. It presents, synthesizes and applies knowledge from many disciplines to show how cities are part of nature and to demonstrate how they can be planned and designed in concert with natural processes rather than in conflict.

My goal was to transform the way people think about cities and thus to change the way cities are designed and built. So I wrote the book for a broad audience—for journalists, politicians, developers, and city dwellers, as well as for designers and planners, for practitioners as well as academics. The book was widely reviewed in the general press, such as The New York Times and Washington Post, and in professional journals. It inspired editorials and provoked public debate about urban nature and city design.

Historians credit The Granite Garden as the first example of urban environmental history; it inspired a new generation of scholars whose books on the environmental history of particular cities are now winning awards. Others cite the book as the way they first learned about landscape architecture and urban design and the reason they entered their profession.

The Granite Garden is still in print. It has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese, and excerpts have been published in books about design and design theory. Widely read by a general audience, it is still a standard university text in many subjects, from architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design and planning to urban and environmental studies, geography, and history. A new, expanded electronic edition (2018) features new cases and reflects on changes since 1984.
The Granite Garden is organized by sections on air, earth, water, life, and ecosystems. The book describes comprehensive strategies for sweeping change as well as incremental solutions.

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“The Granite Garden (1984), single-handedly reinvigorated the urban ecology movement and its connection to design and planning, and is widely regarded as the most important book authored by a landscape architect in a generation.”

ALAN BERGER, Professor of Urban Design and Landscape Architecture, MIT

“Nearly three decades after its original publication...The Granite Garden remains one of the clearest, most cogent meditations on the power of landscapes as metropolitan systems.”

JANE WOLFF, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto
“The Granite Garden inspired myself and other practitioners in the fields of watershed health, urban design, and land use planning in our region. It also informed much of the work that both the NGO community and government agencies have pursued over the intervening twenty-eight years to provide access to nature, manage stormwater in more ecologically sustainable ways and generally do a better job of integrating nature into the urban environment.” MIKE HOUCK, Executive Director, Urban Greenspaces Institute

“The Granite Garden, quite simply, shaped much of my research and practice. I …read her book and was convinced that urban design needed to be at the center of the work colleagues and I were developing to connect Penn with the West Philadelphia community. That work, significantly inspired by Spirn’s work and writing, led to the creation of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships… Its work has been adapted across the United States and around the world.” IRA HARKAVY, Associate Vice President, University of Pennsylvania
The formation of inversions in valley cities and street canyons, both a result of the same processes.

“*The Granite Garden* … pioneered the field of landscape urbanism by examining the role of natural ecosystems in urban design. This study continues to influence the development of this important field today, which is at the forefront of professional practice.”

REUBEN RAINNEY, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

“In *The Granite Garden*, [Spirn] launched a revolution in thinking about the relationship between nature, the urban environment, and we who inhabit these realms … the kind of thinking that today underlies Landscape Urbanism, Ecological Urbanism, Sustainable Urbanism…. Anne was the first to understand and articulate these concepts to a broad audience. And she was among the first to practice and teach it.” DENNIS FRENCHMAN, Professor of Urban Design, MIT
"Anne pointed the way towards a sustainable future long before sustainability entered the professional lexicon…. The Granite Garden has since served as a foundation for new vital strands of practice, such as Landscape Urbanism."

IGNACIO BUNSTER, Principal, WRT

"The Granite Garden is unique in offering a broad audience some of the ways landscape architecture can creatively apply its tools and techniques to improve the quality of urban life. The author has placed the book in context with earlier efforts by Halprin and McHarg within our profession. Beyond that, it ranks as a contribution to national design dialogue along with the works of Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford, Anne Whiston Spirn brings honor to the profession and the profession is honored to count her as one of us."

ASLA AWARD JURY COMMENTS, 1984
THE GRANITE GARDEN: URBAN NATURE AND HUMAN DESIGN

JURY COMMENTS
The jury was fortunate to have a publication of this quality, originality and significance to which to respond. The Granite Garden is unique in offering a broad audience some of the ways landscape architecture can creatively apply its tools and techniques to improve the quality of urban life.

The author has placed the book in context with earlier efforts by Halprin and McHarg within our profession. Beyond that, it ranks as a contribution to national design dialogue along with the works of Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford. Anne Whiston Spirn brings honor to the profession and the profession is honored to count her as one of us.
THE PROJECT

This is a book about 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. It reviews comprehensive strategies for sweeping change most readily implemented in rapidly growing cities, as well as incremental solutions more appropriate to the gradual redesign of existing cores. It focuses on the look and shape of the city, especially the open space in which buildings are set.

The basic philosophy that underlies the book is that the city is a part of nature, rather than antithetical to it. This idea has profound implications for how the city is designed, built, and maintained for the health, safety and welfare of every city resident. The book surveys what is currently known about the natural environment of the city: its air quality and climate, its geology and soil, its water dynamics and quality, its plant and animal communities, and the processes of the urban ecosystem. The book describes the consequences of disregarding nature in urban design and offers potential solutions.

The Granite Garden summarizes what we know about urban nature and demonstrates how this knowledge can be applied to the design of parks, plazas, buildings, streets and highways, and other public works. There are other books about nature in the city, but this is the first book by a single author that provides a comprehensive overview of the subject. If we are to address the problem of the city in any meaningful way, we must look beyond narrow solutions to short-term problems and strike at the heart of the problem with long-term, comprehensive strategies.

The rewards for designing cities in concert with nature apply to all cities across the globe, old and new, large and small. Opportunities for change are most sweeping in new settlements, but even old and dense cities are constantly being redesigned and rebuilt. The investment required to upgrade the infrastructure of older cities will require billions of dollars in North America alone. The opportunities for a fresh approach to resources and waste are enormous, but the potential for costly blunders is vast. This book outlines how cities in general and landscape architects in particular can take advantage of this effort to design cities that are safer, healthier, more economical to build and maintain, more beautiful, and more memorable.

Urban wilds represent an aesthetic alternative to formal parkland and an opportunity to provide more parks on reduced maintenance budgets. The Boston Redevelopment Authority has inventoried the city's remaining natural areas. This study identified 2,000 acres of urban wilds, nearly seven percent of the city's land, as natural areas worthy of conservation.
2014 marked the 30th anniversary of the book’s publication. The occasion was celebrated by numerous publications and events and by the production of a new and expanded electronic edition of the book (2018).

The book’s original publication in January 1984 coincided with the release of the first MacIntosh computer to use a graphical interface and mouse. Although puny in capacity, those early personal computers ushered in a revolution in visualizing, collecting, and processing information, which led, in turn, to a transformation of knowledge about the relationship between the natural environment and the design of cities. The new edition reflects upon that transformation, about what has changed and what has remained the same over the past 30 years. It describes new trends and new cases of successful adaptation of city design to urban nature.

The new e-book is designed to be read in two ways: through verbal text (with links to images and captions) or as an essay of images and captions (with links to the book’s text). This is a new kind of reading experience.


Below A new website (www.granitegarden.net) features successful cases of ecological urbanism, which are searchable by keywords.
“Reclaiming Common Ground” laid out a vision now being realized around the world. It links issues often seen as unrelated and as competing for scarce resources—polluted water in Boston Harbor, deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods, and degraded public open space—and designed a solution that addressed all three.

Top Boston Harbor. The vision cited design precedents, including (below) Detention Basin/Skyline Plaza, Denver and Wastewater treatment and Werribee Farm, Melbourne, Australia.
Reclaiming Common Ground: The Future Shape of Boston

“If cities are to be healthful, vital and delightful places, they must be considered part of the natural environment. So says Harvard’s Anne Whiston Spirn, a pioneer in the field of urban ecology and one of the most acclaimed visionaries to emerge in America this generation.”

STEVE CURWOOD, Boston Globe, 1985

“Reclaiming Common Ground” opened up a new approach to urban design and planning, one which exploits urban vacant land as a resource and which links community development in inner-city neighborhoods with environmental restoration. Built designs for neighborhood open space were catalysts for community development, which today are beloved local landmarks. This vision helped launch, sustain, and advance public dialogue, which changed the course of Boston’s future and laid the foundations for the Shrinking City and Green Infrastructure/CSO movements, which came into vogue 20 years later.

My goal in Reclaiming Common Ground was to demonstrate how the approach advocated in The Granite Garden could be applied to an existing city. The work was conducted as a research project and in my landscape architecture studio courses at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In 1985, the AIA invited me to present this work as one of three lectures, nation-wide, on the future shape of the American city. The Boston Globe reviewed it in a feature article, which prompted further public debate. Fifteen years later, the lecture was reprinted as the concluding chapter of a book on The American Planning Tradition.

The ideas first proposed here were more fully fleshed out in the West Philadelphia Landscape Project and are now being realized in Philadelphia and other cities, more than 30 years later.

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National Endowment for the Arts
American Institute of Architects
City of Boston
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Johns Hopkins Press
Water, Neighborhoods, and Public Places

The project’s single most important discovery was the correlation between buried floodplains and vacant land. Thirty percent of the land in Boston’s Dudley Street neighborhood, once covered by houses, was vacant by 1985, but most of the abandonment was concentrated in the valley bottom, where a stream once formed the boundary between Roxbury and Dorchester. People believed that the vacant land was caused by riots and arson, but my research demonstrated that vacancies on the former floodplain appeared within a few decades of construction.
Damage and abandonment on buried floodplains is a national problem. In the nineteenth century, streams were put in sewers, and now vacant land marks the course of former streams in distressed neighborhoods, where houses were demolished after the ground beneath them subsided due to underground water movement and settling landfill. Such conditions pose a threat to health and safety. My research identified and called attention to this pervasive national problem.

In 1985, Boston Harbor was polluted by overflows from the city’s sewers, which carried a combination of sanitary sewage and stormwater runoff. These combined sewer overflows occurred after heavy rains, when there was too much sewage for treatment plants to handle. At the time, Boston planned to build a massive new sewage treatment plant to solve the problem.

In 1985, Reclaiming Common Ground demonstrated how vacant land on buried floodplains could be restored as landscape infrastructure designed to carry and detain stormwater, in order to protect property from flooding, to serve as a framework around which to rebuild the community, and to solve the regional water quality problem of combined sewer overflows.
There are precedents for landscape infrastructure to manage stormwater. At the time, this approach was aimed at reducing floods, not combined sewer overflows. This plaza in Denver, Colorado, built in the 1970s, was designed as a detention basin to hold water for hours or days after storms in order to reduce flooding in the South Platte River.

![Skyline Plaza, Denver](image1)

There are also precedents for landscape-based wastewater treatment. This wetland in Melbourne, Australia was constructed as both a bird sanctuary and as part of one of the city’s sewage treatment facilities.

![Werribee Farm, Melbourne, Australia](image2)

My 1985 landscape architecture studio at Harvard proposed a strategic landscape infrastructure as a frame for rebuilding housing on the largely vacant “Dudley Triangle,” much of which lies on the buried floodplain. They presented their ideas at a public meeting amidst heated debate. The studio alerted the community to the danger of rebuilding on the buried floodplain. The award-winning housing project, built in the late 1980s, incorporated the students’ proposals, thereby averting future disaster.

![Student design, 1985](image3)
This 1985 article in The Boston Globe hailed my proposals for the future shape of Boston as pioneering and visionary. Three decades later, many of these ideas are being implemented in Philadelphia and other cities.
Cooper’s Place

My 1984 landscape architecture studio at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design studied the open space potential of Boston’s vacant urban land. Designing Cooper’s Place Community Garden in Roxbury introduced the students to the residents and the neighborhood. The challenge was to design a meeting place adjacent to the garden and to propose a use for this vacant lot.

Each student designed a version of the garden and presented their design to the gardeners. The design chosen by the gardeners for construction was inspired by their favorite Boston open space, the Fenway Rose Garden, with its white trellises. The garden was built by unemployed youth enrolled in a landscape management program at Roxbury Community College, as part of their on-the-job training.

Cooper’s Place quickly became a neighborhood landmark and was a catalyst for other improvements to properties around it. There have been weddings there and many important community events. The striking design has played an important role in the garden’s success. Three decades later, it continues to thrive and is now the site of a new environmental education center. Investment in good design paid off.
My lecture was published in 2000, accompanied by reflections on the political barriers to the acceptance of the ideas. By then, I had been working for 13 years on similar design proposals in Philadelphia, where they are now being implemented.
WPLP pioneered the use of the Web in design, planning, education, and community development. Since its launch in March 1996, millions of people from more than 90 countries have visited the WPLP website.

*Left* Screenshot from the current WPLP home page (www.wplp.net), which convey the WPLP mission: to restore nature, rebuild communities, and empower youth in synergistic ways.
West Philadelphia Landscape Project

"[Spirn] became a local hero, educator, leader of change, communicator, and a connector of people from all walks of life — taking her vision and making it a reality in the lives of residents, students, the design community, and government … It was through her groundbreaking work that the City of Philadelphia can now boast being the Greenest City in America … leading the effort to green America’s cities through programs like our Green City, Clean Waters initiative."

HOWARD NEUKRUG, Commissioner, Philadelphia Water Department

The West Philadelphia Landscape Project (WPLP) is a landmark of urban design and design education, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. WPLP built real projects in partnership with community residents. It inspired middle schoolers to design changes to their neighborhood and taught them HTML in order to tell their story on the Internet. It transformed their chronically failing school. It forged relationships between inner-city kids and privileged university students. And it started a chain of events that contributed to a revolution in water-quality management represented by Philadelphia’s billion-dollar “green” infrastructure project. All this was the product of design thinking.

Uniquely valuable is WPLP’s engagement over 26 years with a single place, the Mill Creek watershed and neighborhood. Known as “The Bottom,” the neighborhood is one of many such “Black Bottoms” in the U.S. They are at the bottom, economically, socially, and topographically. Here, harsh socio-economic conditions and racial discrimination are exacerbated by health and safety hazards posed by a high water table and unstable ground. Teaching landscape literacy, which entails both understanding the world and transforming it, has been a means for recognizing and redressing those injustices, just as verbal literacy was a cornerstone of the American civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. Literacy in landscape enabled youth to read the environmental, social, economic, and political stories embedded in their local landscape and gave them a way to design new stories, to envision how to transform their neighborhood.

WPLP has designed and built dozens of community gardens on vacant blocks, which have enhanced life and stimulated tangible community development; some have won awards.

WPLP has been recognized internationally, nationally, and locally. It has been featured in newspaper articles, professional journals, national radio and television broadcasts, and international conferences and symposia, including a 1999 meeting at the White House.
WPLP’s Mill Creek Project, an environmental design curriculum, transformed a middle school that was considered one of the worst in the city. Our teaching partners have founded similar projects in other schools, and the curriculum has inspired schools around the U.S. and abroad.

WPLP’s pioneering digital database, created in the 1980s, helped push Philadelphia to create a Geographic Information System (GIS) database for the entire city. The City hired a former WPLP research assistant to help lead this effort.

WPLP has pioneered the use of the Internet for planning, implementation, and education. The first WPLP website was launched in early 1996 and won seven awards for design excellence. The site has received millions of visits from more than 90 countries.

WPLP has no client in the conventional sense. We work with partners who wish to collaborate—community gardeners, teachers and children, public officials—and make the results freely available.

Principal Partners
Philadelphia Water Department (1999–present)
Aspen Farms Community Garden (1988–present)
Sulzberger Middle School (1995–2002)
Mill Creek Coalition (1998–2000)

Sponsors
University of Pennsylvania, Netter Center for Community Partnerships
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
J.N. Pew Charitable Trust
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
Ford Foundation
Philadelphia Urban Resources Partnership
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Kellogg Foundation
John Simon Guggenheim Foundation

Model for how environmental history can demonstrate how the urban environment affects and shapes city life, Environmental History, 2005

Model for applying Internet-based learning activities for K-12 classrooms, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2004

Person of the Month, Philadelphia School District, November 1998
“This project [WPLP] demonstrates the links between environmental issues, education and heritage, and is a model for Ottawa as it seeks to comprehensively implement a “green city” strategy.”

CITY OF OTTAWA, Canada, Growth Management Plan (2003)

“The West Philadelphia Landscape Project [is] one of the most extraordinary projects of ‘social design’ of the last two decades.”

ROBERT FISHMAN, Professor of Urban Planning and Design, University of Michigan
Design Opportunities: Buried Floodplains and Vacant Land

Much vacant land in West Philadelphia lies on the buried floodplain of Mill Creek, a correlation common to many other cities, including Boston, where I first discovered the phenomenon. The Mill Creek once drained two-thirds of West Philadelphia. Now, buried in a sewer, it carries all the stormwater and sanitary sewage from that area. Like most older U.S. cities, Philadelphia has a combined sanitary and storm sewer system, which overflows into rivers and streams after heavy rainfall and produces a flow that exceeds the capacity of sewage treatment plants. Since 1987, WPLP has demonstrated how a “green” infrastructure could use vacant land to hold stormwater in landscape projects that simultaneously restore water quality (by reducing combined sewer overflows) and rebuild neighborhoods.

First with hand-drawn maps in 1987–1988, then with digital maps, we analyzed the Mill Creek watershed, its topography and drainage, sewer system, and vacant land, as well as its land use and demographics.

Since 1987, WPLP has identified concentration of vacant land in valley bottoms as an opportunity to restore natural systems and rebuild inner-city communities.

Above Vacant land on the buried floodplain.

Right Mapping the Mill Creek watershed. During WPLP’s first phase (1987–1991), the focus was on the southern section and included territory outside the watershed.
Designing Frameworks for Action

From the very beginning of the project, design and construction have gone hand in hand with mapping and planning. From 1987–1991, WPLP designed and built dozens of community gardens as models for how to build a sense of community and how to approach the design of larger neighborhoods. Many were catalysts for community development and many of these gardens survive today. Design had a strong influence on survival. The most successful designs were those that offered an open structure, which invited people to embellish. This approach has informed WPLP’s design work since 1988.

These models of success have evolved over the past quarter century, within the frameworks we designed. One community garden, Aspen Farms, has been at the heart of WPLP’s work since 1988. That year, the task was to incorporate a meeting place for a garden for fifty people without displacing anyone. One student’s design, built in 1989, features a “Main Street” created by shaving off a few feet from many garden plots along the central path. The design made Aspen Farms a neighborhood showpiece and provided a framework that accommodates change.

From 1994–2002, as part of WPLP’s Mill Creek Project, Aspen Farms served as an outdoor classroom for a Sulzberger Middle School, which is down the street. In the late 1990s, my students designed and built a new water garden and outdoor classroom for the middle school.

The partnership between Aspen Farms, the middle school, and WPLP was the subject of a TV special on NBC Nightly News.
The *West Philadelphia Landscape Plan: A Framework for Action* (1991) combines a top-down (comprehensive) and bottom-up (grassroots) approach. It does not prescribe a particular method or outcome, but is instead an open-ended guide that identifies opportunities for change and potential actors. Like the Main Street of Aspen Farms, it is meant to be filled in by the actions of a host of individuals, groups, and public agencies.

At the heart of this design framework is the buried floodplain of Mill Creek, to be designated as “Mill Creek Park,” a special district in which low-lying vacant land would be used to hold stormwater. It would not be a traditional park, however; some vacant land could be redeveloped for commercial uses. The design also calls for revealing and celebrating the presence of the buried creek.

The Walnut–Market Corridor, which includes the main east-west traffic arteries, is the second part of the framework. In 1991, this corridor was full of vacant land, and portions still are. Other parts of the proposal include: The Urban Forest, Redesigning Small Neighborhoods, and a Digital Data Center.

WPLP proposals inspired changes in public policy and led to new opportunities for urban environmental planning and landscape design.

*Above* A framework for action: Mill Creek Park and the Market-Walnut Corridor.

The proposed “plan” is a framework for action, which invites participatory improvisations by diverse actors, from individuals to public agencies. The plan is therefore presented in diagrams and a fictional text.


**Mill Creek Park**

1. Vacant blocks in the floodplain
2. Vacant blocks in the floodplain reclaimed for community gardens, orchard, and playfield
3. Outdoor market and community garden in the floodplain
4. Flood control and park


Mill Creek Park flows across West Philadelphia, winding its way through several neighborhoods, from the Mill Creek neighborhood on the north, through the Market Walnut Corridor to Spruce Hill, and along West Shore.

Every schoolchild knows the story of Mill Creek and the Park. How the creek once flowed on the land, and how it was then buried in a sewer and built upon. How the force of the creek’s waters broke through the sewer and flooded basements, crumbled foundations, and caved in streets. How the land above the sewer became open once again, a gash of vacant land, trashed and abandoned. How Mill Creek Park was built and how rain now runs off rooftops, streets, and sidewalks into ponds in the park. How these ponds hold the water and slow its passage to the sewer, the treatment plant, and the river. Every schoolchild knows the connection between park and river.

At first glance, Mill Creek Park does not seem like a single park at all, but many disconnected bits of local open space (ballcourts, playgrounds, playfields, community gardens) and businesses (garden centers, tree nurseries, and permeable parking lots). The thread that connects the whole—Mill Creek—flows beneath streets and park through an enormous, underground sewer.

In early spring, carpets of blue scilla bloom in grass and groves throughout the park. Red maples with their haze of red flowers in spring and scarlet leaves in fall and sycamores with their white trunks, grow in the damp soil of the old floodplain.

The character of each part of the park reflects the needs and values of residents in adjacent neighborhoods.
The Market–Walnut Corridor


After many years of planning and waiting, new buildings are being constructed in the Walnut–Market Corridor. The “renewal” promises jobs and educational opportunities for West Philadelphia. This was a long time in the making. During all those years, the “temporary” landscape established in the early 1990s grew and matured into an attractive setting that drew private investment. The new buildings were designed to fit within that landscape.

Double rows of trees were planted along the sidewalks on most vacant lots, and the interiors were planted in lawns, cloverfields, and meadows.

Another large lot was planted with a grid of small trees—a nursery for street trees. Every three to five years, the trees are transplanted to city streets and replanted with new trees. All this created a landscape framework for future redevelopment.

The Mill Creek Garden Center and Nursery occupies several large properties between 42nd and 47th Streets. The main retail center is designed like a garden; this is where the flowers, vegetables, and garden supplies are displayed and sold. Small trees and shrubs are in outlying lots nearby.

The Art Folk Park is a large, open meadow, visible from passing cars and buses, where artists construct and display their works. The works change continually. There is no formal selection process... Many of the works are quite whimsical; others are more serious.

The Market–Walnut Corridor is recognized nationally as a model for attracting reinvestment and guiding long-term community development.
The Urban Forest

1. A block of rowhouses with street trees
2. A block of rowhouses with street trees
3. Playfield, trees, and parking
4. A nursery for street trees


From the air, much of West Philadelphia looks like an urban forest. On the ground, Spruce, Walnut, and Chestnut Streets are shady, green corridors through which traffic flows. Off the major streets, within the neighborhoods, a massive reforestation has occurred. Even the narrowest streets are planted with trees. The new trees have made an enormous difference to comfort on streets and in homes on summer afternoons and evenings. The sound of traffic seems softer.

The new trees for West Philadelphia streets were grown right in the neighborhood on large, open lots. The trees start out as small whips, densely planted, and the weaker trees are thinned out as they grow to make room for the more vigorous. Every three to five years, the trees are transplanted to city streets and parks, and a new cycle of planting begins again.

Many West Philadelphia schools have living laboratories—successional meadows and wooded groves that the children care for and study as part of their science class.

There are groves of fruit trees on other formerly vacant properties. Apple Day is now celebrated every year on a summer Sunday; a day when the apples are ripe and everyone comes to pick their own.

West Philadelphia has been the focus of a twenty-year study on the effects of trees on urban microclimate. The Urban Forestry Project has brought international attention to West Philadelphia. The dramatic aesthetic results of the reforestation program prompted many other cities to imitate it even before the results of the microclimate study became known.
Redesigning Small Neighborhoods


Many neighborhoods in West Philadelphia look very different than they did a century ago or even a decade ago. There are now gardens, outdoor workshops, playlots, and small parking lots between houses on blocks of rowhouses where once there was no outdoor space at all besides the street, sidewalk, and porch, and where ten years ago trashed vacant lots formed gaping holes between houses. Trees now shade the sidewalks on most residential blocks, where sun once baked them like an oven every summer.

Walking or driving through neighborhoods north of Market Street, the visitor is struck by the diversity among the blocks, despite their basic similarity.

Community development started small and proceeded block by block. While the interest of most residents remained focussed on their own block, many individuals emerged who were interested in working to improve the larger neighborhood. This has produced a cadre of leaders who have been influential in a host of projects within their neighborhood, as well as in the larger West Philadelphia community.

Changes to blocks range from the minimal—street trees and window boxes—to more extensive improvements—new houses, gardens, or parking lots on former vacant lots.

The neighborhoods south of Market Street don’t look much different than they did tell years ago. They have received a more subtle renewal.
WPLP continues to design within this framework for action. What would Mill Creek Park be like? What about a water garden that is also an outdoor classroom and a stormwater detention basin? How can we design a process by which such projects can be supported, designed, built, and sustained over time? Hundreds of students in my classes at the University of Pennsylvania and MIT have designed answers to these questions over the past 25 years.

These classes challenge students to be pragmatic visionaries: grounded in an understanding of people, place, and politics, yet never losing sight of visions of what might be. Students’ proposals range from detailed designs to strategic landscape plans. Working in a real neighborhood with real people on a real project, they put theory into practice, and some of their designs have been built.

Starting in fall 1996, all student work is presented online and archived and featured on the WPLP website. Students’ design proposals have been viewed by thousands of visitors to the website, and they helped persuade public officials and community residents that it is feasible to redesign and rebuild the existing urban drainage system so that it is functional, economical, and beautiful.
Watershed “Order” in the Wynnefield-Overbrook Neighborhood:
An Analogy to Stream Order Classifications*

Applying the concept of nested watersheds at the neighborhood scale, we identify and rank
“sheds” using a classification scheme inspired by stream order classifications in hydrology.
In this hierarchy, the smallest unit is the “microwatershed” flowing into a storm drain, extending
to “alley-sheds” and “street-sheds,” and on up to “neighborhood-sheds” comprising those
streets draining toward a common point through both surface and sewer pathways.

“Street-shed”

“Alley-shed”

Capturing stormwater
overflow at the base
of the “neighborhood-shed”

Creating Community Care and Conforming to Code

Parking Lot Edge Condition

Philadelphia Parking Design Guidelines
require a 6’ vegetated buffer where a lot
meets a residential parcel. The Community
Green BMP takes advantage of this require-
ment to create a parking lot edge that spon-
sors a sense of ownership while capturing
stormwater runoff.

Parking Lot Corner Condition

The Community Green BMP takes advan-
tage of awkward corner conditions by cre-
ating larger scaled garden rings and commu-
nal planting areas.

Parking Lot Interior Condition

Philadelphia Parking Design Guidelines
require a 10% vegetated interior for each lot.
Here, the Community Green BMP scales up
to become a shared garden space to accom-
modate double-loaded gardeners.

Personalizing the Parking Lot

Trellises designed to buffer seating and
gardening areas also offer a framework
upon which gardeners can grow hanging
vegetation or hang tools / personal items.

*See Ward, D’Ambrosia, and Middendorf, 2008,
“Stream Classification,” The Ohio State University
Extension. Available at: http://ohioline.osu.edu/
ars-fact/pdf/AEX3459/StreamClassification.pdf

CONCEPT | BMP DESIGN | IMPLEMENTATION | DEMO PROJECTS
IMPLEMENTATION I Phase 1 Street Detail

In the first stage, the city will repave the street, adding wide tree trenches that expand under the sidewalk and into the street. Previous paving over the bike and parking lane will both allow water into the tree trench and marks the lanes.

The city would keep the travel lanes, but repave the parking, bike lanes and sidewalks in a permeable material. This would visually slow traffic, making streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Structures underground allow for uncompacted soil, promoting healthy street trees and providing space for water detention. Tree pits and trenches have flexible designs that can be adapted by institutions and residents.

Diagram of the Silva Cell, by DeepRoot (www.deeproot.com)
The Mill Creek Project transformed a school, changed lives, and became a model for educational reform.

*Above and right* Middle school students learned how to read the landscape of their neighborhood, to understand how it came to be, and to envision designs for its future. They also learned HTML, which prepared some for future careers in Web design.

**The Mill Creek Project:**

**Environmental Design Curriculum**

In 1994, confronted with skepticism about the existence and danger of Mill Creek’s buried floodplain, I launched a program on landscape literacy and community development in partnership with a local middle school, where hundreds of 11–13 year-old children learned to read and tell the landscape of Mill Creek. They traced its past, deciphered its stories, and described their visions for its future. The tools they used were their own eyes and imagination, the place itself, and historical documents: maps, photographs, letters, and newspapers. The program had four parts: reading landscape, designing landscape change, building landscape improvements, and documenting these proposals and accomplishments on the Internet.

In 2012, I interviewed children (then 27 years old) and teachers from the middle-school. What they told me was revelatory. A girl told how it had led her from homelessness to a career in Web design. The teachers described how the project had transformed the entire school and their careers. These reflections are featured in a series of short multimedia videos for the Web.
WPLP’s Web Design: Another Framework for Action

The Web has been an integral part of WPLP since early 1996, when our first website was launched. That first version featured my students’ designs, a digital database, design reports, and built projects of 1987–1991. In 1997, it was enlarged to include the middle school students’ website. Over the years, the website has evolved, and it continues to be a showcase and a forum (www.wplp.net). The WPLP website has received millions of visits from over 90 different countries since 1996, and has been a significant factor in WPLP’s widespread impact. WPLP inspired a computer curriculum at the middle school, which introduced hundreds of children to Web authoring and computer programming, some of whom have gone on to a career in those areas. Web design can also be a framework for action.

WPLP pioneered the use of the Web in design, planning, education, and community development. Since 1996, millions of people from more than 90 countries have visited the WPLP website.

Above Screen shot from the WPLP home page (www.wplp.net).

Right WPLP website in 1997 (top), 2002 and 2008 (middle), from 1997–2002, middle-schoolers learned HTML and designed their own websites (bottom).
“This project [WPLP] brilliantly and uniquely integrated research, teaching, learning, and service in ways that resulted in benefits to scholarship, education, and improvement to communities. It is an exemplary model of how a place-based project can have wide applicability, as it works to solve a universal problem manifested in a local community.”

IRA HARKAVY, Associate Vice President, University of Pennsylvania

“The West Philadelphia Landscape Project was twenty years ahead of its time: it anticipated today’s concerns with urban water management, sustainability, and the relationship between physical and social infrastructure.”

JANE WOLFF, Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto

“Anne Spirn’s work is that of a visionary for a world where design allows people to occupy earth with care and love. Furthermore, her tireless dedication to education and community design has effectively promoted the enhancement of the quality of both environment and life.”

ANNE VERNEZ MOUDON, Professor of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington
“As a guide to a coherent, intricate and transformative approach to landscape architecture and urban design, Anne Whiston Spirn is a visionary of the first order whose innovative work on the ground has transformed and enhanced the quality of life in low-income urban neighborhoods in deep and lasting ways.”

CHARLOTTE KAHN, Boston Foundation

“While at Penn, ... [Spirn] constructed the intellectual gateway between McHargian Ecological Planning and what would later become known as Landscape Urbanism. The project most critical to this process was her West Philadelphia Project. This complex participatory action project showed how ecological systems not only underlie but erode and reshape cities through decay and economic impacts. Through it, she moved the department beyond mapping and reports to engaging communities in creating a future in which disparate and fragmented neighborhoods could meet their own needs while playing a role in creating a more robust urban ecosystem.”

KATHRYN GLEASON, Professor of Landscape Architecture, Cornell University

Above  WPLP has been featured in international journals and national media, such as NBC Nightly News. Middle school students were invited to present their work as part of Governor Tom Ridge’s Budget Speech on February 3, 1998.

Left  In 2000, President Bill Clinton visited the middle school and learned about the Mill Creek Project.
Anne’s West Philadelphia Landscape Project is a classic effort to improve the relationship between nature and neighbourhood. She began by discovering that declining and abandoned homes in the area tended to follow the route of the former Mill Creek, a stream buried in the 19th century … She then worked with local residents, middle school children, and the city to reclaim these lots for community gardens, open spaces and amenities, forming a green armature through the neighbourhood. After decades, her work not only transformed West Philadelphia, but also transformed hundreds of kids who learned to discover nature in the urban scene.” **DENNIS FRENCHMAN**, Professor of Urban Design, MIT

“Deeply influenced by American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, her insights are grounded in her work as a professional, especially in such projects as the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, which still is a model for similar efforts today to revive inner-city communities.”

**REUBEN RAINNEY**, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

WPLP has been hailed by national and local media. Above, Planning Magazine. Right, The Philadelphia Inquirer.
SURROUNDINGS

A long-buried creek in West Philadelphia

By Thomas Hine

M ost people probably don’t think of Philadelphia as a landscape, but rather as a sprawling abstraction, a great expanse of grid paper made concrete. The monotony of Philadelphia is most evident when you drive through it, though it’s easy enough for the walker to believe that the city has no real topography — except in some oddball places such as Manayunk and Roxborough. Cyclists are more likely to think about Philadelphia as a place of hills and valleys; they can feel it in their calf muscles. But the featurelessness is an illusion.

White City, South Philadelphia and the Northeast are relatively flat coastal plains, the hills of West Philadelphia and Northwest Philadelphia signal the beginning of the piedmont. A boundary of continental glaciers slashes through the city, but the pattern of streets suppresses our awareness of it.

For Anne Whiston Spirn, who chairs the department of landscape architecture and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, Mill Creek exemplifies the problem the city has understanding itself.

Mill Creek is one of the city’s oldest, probably not quite as large as Wissahickon Creek, in terms of the volume of water it carries, but its watershed does encompass most of West Philadelphia.

But if you’re not familiar with Mill Creek, you’re not alone. For most of its course, Mill Creek is invisible, channeled into an immense sewer.

Spirn recalls that when she was a child in Pembertonville 20 years ago, a piece of the street collapsed and she was able to look into the hole and get a view.

The long-buried Mill Creek in West Philadelphia

CREEK from Pt. 1 of the fast-moving creek. Later, she said, and some of her students assisted in the design of a garden by residents of a block where the garages are inaccessible because the land has settled into the buried streambed. And she has determined that many of the areas of greatest housing vacancy in West Philadelphia are above the buried Mill Creek, which rises in Lower Merion and runs diagonally through the area, creating valleys near 47th and Fairmount and 43rd and Walnut, then flows into the Schuylkill near 43rd and Woodland.

People in the neighborhood find the existence of Mill Creek and the problems it causes far more believable than people from the City Planning Commission, or developers or architects, or for that matter, anybody who doesn’t live in the neighborhood," she said.

Mill Creek was one of many concerns of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, which was done by Spirn’s department at Penn, with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s Philadelphia Green program and the West Philadelphia Partnership, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The project’s most visible results to date are a series of community gardens and open spaces that were created with neighborhood groups, with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other federal grants, and as ways to help people organize to improve neighborhoods.

It’s worth emphasizing the literal grassroots nature of this plan, which was highly collaborative and involved a great deal of listening to residents’ ideas about what their neighborhoods ought to be. Having listened, the students, who were involved helped people build things, and thus created successful examples of many of the approaches rec-
In 2012, I began to record oral histories from people who have participated in WPLP over the past three decades. Among those interviewed were teachers and children (now 30 years old) from the middle-school. What they told me was revelatory. Their stories are captured in a series of short multimedia videos: *Buried River, Opened Lives*. In “When Learning Is Real,” three middle-school teachers describe how the Mill Creek Project transformed Sulzberger Middle School and how it changed their understanding of what education can and should be. In “Fatima’s Story,” one of the middle-school students relates how the project changed her life. In “A Way to Fix Things,” a community activist describes her lifetime experience in the Mill Creek neighborhood and her collaboration with WPLP. In “Green City, Clean Waters,” the Philadelphia Water Commissioner describes that city’s landmark program in green infrastructure. In “Coming Full Circle,” three WPLP research assistants describe their role on the project and how it has influenced their career. “The Buried River” describes how the Mill Creek came to be buried in a sewer and the consequences; it includes my own reflections and traces the course of the former creek in today’s landscape.

*Buried River, Opened Lives* premiered at MIT in fall 2014. Since then the videos have been screened at multiple venues. They can be viewed online at www.wplp.net/stories.

Multimedia videos testify to how WPLP has changed lives, minds, policies, and communities. These videos are all online at www.wplp.net/stories.

*Above*  Poster for the 2014 premier screening.

*Right*  Three multimedia videos from the series, “Buried River, Opened Lives.”
Part I / “The Harmonious Coexistence of Nature and Mankind”
The Language of Landscape

“The Language of Landscape argues that landscape is a form of language with its own grammar and metaphors and that, in shaping landscape, people express purpose, values, and ideas. The meanings landscapes hold are not just metaphorical and metaphysical, but real, their messages practical; understanding may spell survival or extinction. The book calls for change in the way we shape our environment. Its goal is to help people read landscapes as products of both nature and culture and to inspire them to envision new landscapes that restore nature and honor culture.

The idea of landscape as language is derived from the core activity of landscape architecture: artful shaping, from garden to region, to fulfill function and express meaning. The roots of this theory are deep and varied, grounded in many fields—anthropology, geography, geology, ecology, history, art history, literature, linguistics, and design, among others. It is a radical theory: in the sense of being rooted in the basic elements of nature and human nature; in the sense of offering a fundamentally different perspective than from any one individual root; and in demanding and enabling radical change in how we choose to think and act.

The Language of Landscape has influenced diverse fields, from landscape architecture to history, literature, art history, art, dance, and poetry. Poet Adrienne Rich included a passage from the book in one of her poems. Artist Katie Holten has incorporated the book’s prologue into installations at numerous museums. The book inspired choreographer Chris Aiken to create “Dwell,” a dance about the experience and creation of place.

The Language of Landscape was written out of my experience as a scholar, practitioner, and photographer of landscape, out of fieldwork and archival research. The West Philadelphia Landscape project was a laboratory for testing and refining the ideas. Photographs prompted and pushed my thinking, as did the work of colleagues like architect Glenn Murcutt. Research on the theory
The Table of Contents is a map of the book: from landscape as language and literature, to landscape composition and expression.

and methods of past designers, such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Frederick Law Olmsted, led me to appreciate the larger tradition within which the language of landscape belongs. The pages shown here show how these strands of practice, art, and scholarship contributed to this theory.


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“The Language of Landscape, is a pathbreaking and ambitious attempt to set out a theory of landscape aesthetics that takes account of both human interpretive frameworks and natural processes."

LAWRENCE VALE, Professor of Urban Planning, MIT

“As artists with an environmentally-based practice, reading her book The Language of Landscape... was a revelation for us... It is apparent that for Anne scholarship is not an isolated, intellectual pursuit, but rather that her practice informs her writing, which in turn informs her practice, which in turn informs her teaching, which in turn informs her practice... Anne not only teaches but embodies Ecology.”

SUSANNAH SAYLOR AND ED MORRIS, Co-Founders, The Canary Project
Magney House, by Glenn Murcutt, who is fluent in landscape language. To the right: two floodplains revealed, and the effects of ignoring landscape "grammar."

"The Language of Landscape ... set forth the essential categories for the analysis of both natural and designed landscapes, categories that continue to influence the teaching of landscape architecture in universities and the way in which professionals conceive and evaluate their own work."

REUBEN RAINEY, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

"Spirn’s re-framing of nature to include human culture and [its] artifacts allows us to draw strength from both and to consider how sustainability might relate to the human body, performance and interactions with audiences. This is design thinking at its finest, not a recipe for creativity, but a pathway towards the integration art, design and sustainable living."

CHRIS AIKEN, Choreographer and Director of MFA Program, Smith College
Part I / “The Harmonious Coexistence of Nature and Mankind”

When the river runs through the city, the city becomes a park. When the river flows, the park becomes a city. This is the spiritual essence of the harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind. The ancient Chinese city was designed to be surrounded by nature, with gardens, parks, and green spaces. While the modern city has lost its connection with nature, the city has become a concrete jungle. However, the city is not the enemy of nature. Instead, it is the enemy of our imagination and creativity.

Nature, like water, flows naturally and adapts to the environment. In the city, nature should also be allowed to flow freely. This is not just a matter of aesthetics, but also a matter of sustainability. The city should be designed to allow nature to flow freely, to absorb rainwater, and to provide a natural cooling effect. This will not only reduce the urban heat island effect, but also provide a source of fresh water for the city.

The city is not just a place for people, but also a place for nature. The city should be designed to allow nature to flow freely, to absorb rainwater, and to provide a natural cooling effect. This will not only reduce the urban heat island effect, but also provide a source of fresh water for the city. The city should be designed to be a place for nature, where nature and culture can coexist.
Photography was an important mode of research, a way to explore ideas about design adaptation to a landscape's deep structure (above) and to reflect on the interplay between Euclidean and fractal geometry in the poetics of landscape expression (right).

"Her work helped ... to reimagine landscapes as a congealed kind of history where the inequities and injustices of the past persist into the present ... to see the ethical and political power that landscapes hold for other possibilities in the future. ... Practice and scholarship blend seamlessly in her work. Her influence upon scholars and designers alike is inestimable because she doesn't fit into any category. She transcends boundaries by bringing fields and people together."

MATTHEW KLINGLE, Professor of History and Environmental Studies, Bowdoin College

"The Language of Landscape has established a theoretical framework for landscape architecture that extends into humanities scholarship: it situates landscapes as cultural artefacts and positions design as both a practical and poetic endeavour;"

JANE WOLFF, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto
How does Spirn’s work relate to the world of dance? Dance, like landscape design, involves designing with the ineffable forces of nature … Spirn’s interweaving of place, culture, biology and technology and aesthetic experience provide a frame for composition which complements the work of choreography perfectly. When I share her work with dancers, I give them access to language and examples of … eco-poetic relationships and ways of understanding composition that are grounded in the fabric of nature and human experience. Spirn’s re-framing of nature to include human culture and [its] artifacts allows us to draw strength from both and to consider how sustainability might relate to the human body, performance and interactions with audiences. This is design thinking at its finest, not a recipe for creativity, but a pathway towards the integration art, design and sustainable living.  

CHRIS AIKEN, Choreographer and Director of MFA Program, Smith College

“Landspace speaks to us. But how? Anne’s Spirn’s superb and unique achievement is to spell out the “how” so that we can better understand landscape’s variant dialects—its distinctive personalities—and respond intelligently, with appropriate emotion.”  

YI-FU TUAN, author of Topophilia
科学と技術をつなぐもの
言語としてのランドスケープ

BLAARWE KAME

De taal van het landschap
De Doorwezaholding
t Van Anne Wimbee Payne

The Language of Landscape

対訳
科学と技術をつなぐもの
言語としてのランドスケープ

アール・A・スコット
英蘭の自然美術家を訪ねたとき
のアメリカン・ナショナル・ガーデンなどの
そのような長所において、科学技術の中で重要な役割を果たすと
考えられます。科学技術の中で重要な役目を果たすと
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考えられる。科学技術の中で重要な役目を果たすと
考えられる。
The Language of Landscape

Landscape is art. Landscape is an ecology. Landscape is political. But is landscape also language?

BY PAUL DROZET

“[The Language of Landscape] is a beautiful and original work, a book about everything that matters in our lives, a book that makes me look differently or more intensely at everything around me.”

ADRIENNE RICH, Poet

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**SLASHES**

Years pass and two who once
don’t know each other at all
dark strokes gouge a white wall as lives
and customs slashed by dates:
October ’17 / May ’68
September ’73

Slash across lives memory pursues its errands
a lent linen shirt pulled unabashedly over her naked shoulders
cardamom seed bitten in her teeth
watching him chop onions

words in the air segregation/partition/apartheid
vodka/cigarette smoke a time
vertigo on subway stairs

Years pass she pressing the time into a box
not to be opened a box
quelling pleasure and pain

You could describe something like this
in gossip write a novel get it wrong

*In wolf-tree, see the former field*
The river’s muscle: greater than its length
the lake’s light-blistered blue: scorning circumference
A map inscribes relation
only when
underground aquifers are fathomed in
water table rising or falling
beneath apparently
imperturbable earth

music from a basement session overheard

2002

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*In wolf-tree, see the former field*: See Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Language of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 18–19: “A ‘wolf’ tree is a tree within a woods, its size and form, large trunk and horizontal branches, anomalous to the environs of slim-trunked trees with upright branches...a clue to the open field in which it once grew alone, branches reaching laterally to the light and up.”
Part 2

Nature, Form, and Meaning


*Marnas: A Journey Through Space, Time, and Ideas*


My writings have provided a fresh appreciation for how ideas of nature, form, and meaning can influence design theory and action.

Beginning in 1985 with “Urban Nature and Human Design: Reclaiming the Great Tradition,” I published a series of essays that trace the history of ideas and practice of landscape design and planning. My approach combines that of the scholar and the practitioner. As a scholar, I document the tradition within which I think and act, compare what other authors do to what they say, study the context of their actions and writings. As a practitioner, I calculate the difficulty of the designer’s task, judge the intentions implicit in their deeds, applaud or condemn the risks they take, and admire the grace with which multiple demands are fulfilled. The essays on Frederick Law Olmsted, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jens Jensen, and Ian McHarg, among others, are written from this dual perspective of scholar and practitioner.

The Marnas website explores these themes through an interactive, immersive three- and four-dimensional space, where visitors experience the interplay between theory and practice, form, function, and meaning.
Landscape Journal: Special Issue on Nature, Form, and Meaning

"'The Poetics of City and Nature,' in Landscape Journal: Special Issue on Nature Form and Meaning, is still one of the most influential writings in landscape architecture and urbanism. This piece was transformative to my career and work, giving me the courage to embrace the allied fields of fine arts as well as ecology and history.”

WALTER HOOD, Hood Design

This special issue of Landscape Journal marked a watershed in the history of the journal. It set a new standard for writing on landscape design theory and practice. Several articles from the special issue, and even the entire issue itself, are required reading in landscape design theory, including my own essay, “The Poetics of City and Nature: Towards a New Aesthetic for Urban Design,” which was reprinted in the journal Places.

Landscape Journal is the world’s leading journal of landscape architecture research. In 1985, it was in debt, criticized for its narrow subject matter (mainly environmental analysis), and the publisher threatened to abandon it. To save the journal, I proposed a special double issue and applied for a grant from the NEA to fund it. As guest editor, I solicited new authors for the journal, helped design a new layout, and chose a provocative cover: an image of James Turrell’s Skyspace.

The special issue repositioned Landscape Journal; articles on design have been a prominent feature of the Journal ever since. It expanded the number and diversity of submissions and increased circulation. The NEA grant paid for a double print run, so a surplus of single copies was sold at bookstores like Urban Center Books in New York. The subsidy from NEA and revenue from sales of extra copies paid off the debt and put Landscape Journal on firm financial footing, which persuaded the University of Wisconsin Press to continue publishing it.

SPONSORS
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National Endowment for the Arts
SPECIAL ISSUE: NATURE, FORM, AND MEANING

This special issue was edited at the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, University of Pennsylvania and the Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Wisconsin–Madison, with assistance provided by the School of Environmental Design, University of Georgia. It was supported, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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*Landscape Journal* is dedicated to the dissemination of the results of academic research and scholarly investigation of interest to practitioners, academicians, and students of landscape architecture.


Volume Seven, Number Two Fall 1988
The Poetics of City and Nature: 
Towards a New Aesthetic for Urban Design

Anne Whiston Spirn

Anne Whiston Spirn is Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania. Her book, The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design (Basic Books, 1984) received the President's Award of Excellence from the American Society of Landscape Architects. This essay is the subject of a new book that further explores the theoretical and aesthetic issues raised in The Granite Garden. She received her A.B. from Radcliffe College and an M.L.A. from the University of Pennsylvania.

Abstract: This essay describes a new aesthetic of landscape and urban design, an aesthetic that encompasses both nature and culture, that embodies function, sensory perception, and symbolic meaning, and that embraces both the making of things and places and the seeing, using, and contemplating of them. This theory is based upon an understanding of nature and culture as comprising interwoven processes that exhibit a complex, underlying order that holds across vast scales of space and time. This basis in process yields a view of urban form as dynamic, as evolving over time, in predictable and unpredictable ways.

The idea of dialogue, with all its embodiment of time, purpose, communication, and response, is central to this theory. The form of the city is seen as the result of complex, overlapping, and interwoven narratives that, together, comprise the context of place and the storylines that connect the place and all those who dwell within it. The issues of time and change, process and pattern, order and randomness, being and doing, and form and meaning are inherent to this theory. These issues are also central to recent theoretical currents in other fields, including art, music, and science. Although this aesthetic prompts a new appreciation of forms of the past, it also demands new forms, new modes of notation and representation, and new processes of design, construction, and cultivation.

The city has been likened to a poem, a sculpture, a machine. But the city is more than a poem, more than a sculpture, more than a machine. It is a place where natural forces pulse and millions of people live—thinking, feeling, dreaming, doing. An aesthetic of urban design must therefore be rooted in the normal processes of nature and of living. It should link function, feeling, and meaning and should engage the senses and the mind.1

The city is both natural and contrived, a transformation of “wild” nature to serve human needs, an evolving entity shaped by both natural and cultural processes. Urban form is dynamic, ever-unfolding through dialogues of statement and response. These dialogues are articulated by individuals and by groups, who, in transforming the city and nature, are themselves transformed. The form of the city thus records many narratives, all embodying stories: stories about the nature of human society (about the relation of the individual to the State or the Church, for example, or the power of commerce); about the quality of deities; and about the nature of Nature. These stories are all bound up in one another, their themes interwoven, their plots never complete.2

In those dialogues that engage both culture and nature lies the basis for a new theory of urban design. This theory, which builds on a rich history of antecedents, as well as recent work in philosophy, art, and science, embodies an aesthetic that recognizes both natural and cultural processes and reveals the rhythms and the patterns created by their discourse.3

This theory applies not only to the city, but to rural regions as well. Many examples described here are drawn from non-urban settings, and one could substitute the words “place” for “city” and “settlement form” for “urban form.” Still, it is in the city that the challenge is both greatest and least recognized, because the human-built structure seems so dominant, because the contrast between nature’s order and human order is particularly acute, and because cultural processes are so densely interwoven and overlain.

This theory is concerned equally with everyday things and with art, with small things like fountains, gardens, and buildings and with large systems like those that transport people or carry wastes. It connects those who live in the city with those who design these objects, places, and systems. It is a theory that will yield new urban forms, forms that are as revolutionary as those revealed by contemporary science, and that will require new modes of notation and representation and new processes of design, construction, and cultivation.

Dimensions of the New Aesthetic

This is an aesthetic that celebrates motion and change, that encompasses dynamic processes, rather than static objects, and that embraces multiple, rather than singular, visions. This is not a timeless aesthetic, but one that recognizes both the flow of passing time and the singularity of the moment in time, that demands both continuity and revolution. This aesthetic engages all the senses, not just sight, but sound, smell, touch, and taste, as well. This aesthetic includes both the making of things and places and the seeing, using, and contemplating of them.

The idea of dialogue, with its embodiment of time, purpose, communication, and response, is central to
this aesthetic. One form of dialogue, essentially introspective, entails the contemplation of such questions as Who Are We? Where Are We? What Do We Value? Another type of dialogue entails the transformation of the external world for human purposes, including construction of shelter, acquisition of food and water, defense, trade, worship, and play. Through these transformations we express what we, as individuals and as societies, value. Both types of dialogues—the internal and the external—are means of knowing oneself and one's place in the world. Throughout history, individuals and societies have engaged in such dialogues and have recorded them in poetry, painting, scientific experiments, and the forms of human settlement. Whether their origins are metaphysical or mundane, these dialogues are ultimately aesthetic.

Many different and even contrasting epistemologies have emphasized an ultimate unity and have stressed that that ultimate unity is aesthetic (Bateson 1980). John Dewey (1958) characterized the sense of an extensive and underlying whole as the essence of aesthetic experience and even of sanity. Design which highlights nature's processes for our contemplation permits the experience of a sense of unity with a larger whole which is the universe in which we live.

A sense of identity—as both an individual and a member of a group—is an important counterpoint to a sense of unity; both are essential to psychological growth and health (Erikson 1965). Erik Erikson described the significance of identity and its development in the individual (Erikson 1968). Relph (1983) and Norberg-Schulz (1979) both stressed the importance of identity as it is expressed in a sense of place. Design which juxtaposes and contrasts nature's order and human order prompts the contemplation of what it means to be human. Design that fosters and intensifies the experience of temporal and spatial scales facilitates both this reflection upon per-
Computer drawings illustrate patterns that result from the interaction among multiple processes. A row of poplars contrasts the interplay between Euclidean and fractal geometry.

“The Poetics of City and Nature” called for a fresh approach to design, one that celebrates nature and culture, motion and change, that encompasses dynamic process rather than static objects, and that embraces multiple, rather than singular visions. It prompted a new appreciation for design of the past, even as it demanded new forms, new modes of notation and representation, and new processes of design, construction, and cultivation.

This essay was among the first to draw upon fractal geometry as a way for designers to understand the patterns created by the interplay of natural and cultural processes and to use this knowledge deliberately to create places that highlight the aesthetic experience of the processes that sustain life. It urged designers to take on responsibility for urban infrastructure, such as sewer and water systems, and to invest them with beauty and meaning.
The essay’s themes of time and change, process and pattern, order and randomness, being and doing, and form and meaning were also central to contemporary explorations in music art, literature, and science. It brought urban and landscape design in tune with theoretical currents in other fields. It also inspired basic tenets of landscape urbanism, which would emerge in the 1990s.
Above The Riverway under construction in Boston, 1892, showing newly-graded floodplain, paths, and streetcar line behind a berm. Most people are blind to the fact that this landscape was designed and constructed, an early example of landscape as infrastructure.

Left “Constructing Nature,” published in Uncommon Ground, is a required text in college classes. It demonstrates that many great places are works of design rather than artifacts of nature alone.
Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted

"Uncommon Ground is the best kind of book, one that shocks the reader into entirely fresh ways of seeing. Perhaps the most important work facing us over the next several years involves the reconception of nature and our relationship to it. This indispensable volume makes a bold start on that project, attacking with imagination, insight, originality, and wit."

MICHAEL POLLAN, author of Second Nature: A Gardener's Education

While Olmsted's contemporaries recognized that Central Park and the Fens were designed and built, this popular realization soon faded. Olmsted was so skillful at concealing the artifice that both the projects he so brilliantly constructed and the profession he had worked so hard to establish became largely invisible. Today the works of many landscape architects are not understood as having been constructed, even when the landscape has been radically reshaped. Many landmarks of the profession are assumed to be works of nature. This blindness prevents their appreciation as artful answers to knotty questions of conflicting environmental values and competing purposes.

"Constructing Nature" is the product of twenty-five years of reflection on Olmsted, including research in the Library of Congress in 1971 and 1994 and in the archives of the Olmsted Historic Site in 1985. I am interested in Olmsted as a practitioner, in how he approached problems similar to those faced by designers today, in the methods he used, his line of reasoning, and the risks he took.

"Constructing Nature" opened people's eyes to the power of landscape design. The essay is widely read in college classes across the U.S., from history to environmental studies and philosophy, as well as design. It is part of a book on "Rethinking the Human Place in Nature" and was written in dialogue with a group of scholars at the University of California Humanities Research Institute. I was the only designer in the group, and the fact that landscape architects construct nature, literally, was a novel idea to them.

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One of the great and incomplete tasks confronting this generation of environmentalists is to effect a reconciliation of humans with their environment, of culture with nature. *Uncommon Ground* is a powerful and persuasive guide in this great cause.

**William K. Reilly**, former administrator, Environmental Protection Agency

"An extraordinary feast from some of the foremost environmental thinkers of our time." **Yi-Fu Tuan**, Professor, University of Wisconsin

"This is a groundbreaking, deeply felt, and deeply thoughtful book." **Tony Hiss**, author of *The Experience of Place*
“This is an intellectually pathbreaking book. Uncommon Ground is loaded with fresh and provocative essays that probe our conceptions of nature... It succeeds brilliantly in showing that ‘nature’ is a human construction—romanticized in parks and wilderness preserves...It argues convincingly that what we have constructed, we can reconstruct—by ending the divorce and attending to the myriad roles that nature plays in our metropolitan lives.”

DANIEL J. KEVLES, Professor of the Humanities, California Institute of Technology
MARNAS

A Journey through Space, Time, and Ideas.

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2017–present

**Marnas: A Journey Through Space, Time, and Ideas**

www.marnasgarden.com

“MarnasGarden.com models the transformative power of the digital humanities as a tool for understanding landscapes across space and time. Image, text, and sound take us on an exquisite journey that cuts to the heart of dilemmas driving twenty-first century practice—given the dynamic nature of landscapes, how do we design for inevitable adaptation? How do we preserve that which must necessarily change? Anne Spirn’s masterful work connects points in time, linking theory and practice in a provocative living expression that breaks new ground in landscape architecture research.”

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*Marnas* provides the first public access to the garden laboratory of the master designer/theorist, Sven-Ingvar Andersson, who documented his experiments there over the course of fifty years through thousands of photographs.

This unique documentation made possible the interactive website (www.marnasgarden.com), designed as an immersive, three- and four-dimensional experience of the place. It is now possible to journey through the garden in space and time: to walk down leafy tunnels, through diverse spaces; to travel across time in successive views of the same space from morning through evening, from winter through spring, summer, and fall, across decades. The goal was to create a visit to Marnas as it existed throughout Andersson’s lifetime.

The website transports the visitor, not only through space and time, but also through a series of ideas, to arrive at new insights. It aspires to evoke the magical quality of Marnas and bring alive the ideas that shaped it. Like the garden itself, it has both a clear formal structure and one that is freely growing, with no one beginning, and no single end. The homepage unfolds via a vertical scroll through a series of gateways. One gateway invites you to take a guided tour of the garden, others, to explore on your own, meet the designer, or travel in time. The goal was to stimulate exploration and interaction, the viewer an active participant.

*Marnas* extends my exploration of photography, multimedia, and website design as media of inquiry and expression. In 1995, I was an early adopter of the Web as a creative medium for publishing and teaching. The Marnas self-guided tour takes my prior experiments to a new level. It is no substitute for being in the place, but it permits a peek into gardens that once were, an experience now only possible through digital media.
MARNAS:

A JOURNEY THROUGH SPACE, TIME AND IDEAS

Take a tour through the garden with Sven-Ingvar Andersson. Hear the stories behind the garden's many rooms. Watch the garden change through seasons and years. Follow the ideas that drive the form. View the full-length tour above (20 minutes) or plot your own path through the short episodes below.
Take a Tour: Multimedia Videos

Take a tour through the garden with Sven-Ingvar Andersson as guide. Hear the stories behind the garden’s many rooms. Watch the garden change through seasons and years. Follow the ideas that drive the form. You can plot your own path through seventeen short episodes or view the full-length tour (20 minutes).

The scripts for the videos are in Andersson’s own words. I selected and translated texts where he reflects on Marnas, its precedents, origins, elements, composition, plants, and meanings. I composed these excerpts into seventeen parts, which originally were intended to be viewed separately, encountered in the self-guided tour as the visitor wanders around the virtual garden. Ultimately, I realized that the short videos could be sequenced to create a story arc, beginning with the dream of a green den and ending in transformation.

Script in hand, it was then a matter of selecting and sequencing photographs, video, and sound to support and extend narrative and tone, establish rhythm, portray meaning, and evoke feeling. The viewer should feel like SIA is showing them around his garden. Images give substance to the words. Music was used sparingly, the preference was to add sounds, like those of digging, clipping, birdsong, and wind, which were implied or alluded to by the images or text.

“Marnasgarden.com intertwines two sensitive and reflective “design minds,” that of Sven-Ingvar Andersson, the master designer who conceived and developed the garden, and that of Anne Whiston Spirn, who has revealed that world of aesthetics and ideas, interpreting theory, deepening meaning, and evoking feeling.”

ELLEN BRAAE, University of Copenhagen
MARNAS: A JOURNEY THROUGH SPACE, TIME, AND IDEAS
Explore the Garden: The Self-Guided Tour

The self-guided tour begins at the driveway. Four features draw your attention. Each affords a choice. Touch the symbol at the upper left, and it expands into a navigation bar. The compass on the lower right tells you that the year is 1992. Its three arrows point in different directions. Touch one arrow to choose your path. Touch the pulsing square in the center of the screen and see the same view in 1979: the tall willows that lined the driveway in 1992 are saplings; the hedge at the garden’s western boundary does not yet exist.

Touch the symbol at the upper right to call up a plan of the garden, which notes your position. Small squares on the plan mark different locations; touch one to move there directly.

As you wander around the garden, you slip in time, across years. At times, you encounter a pulsing square or rectangle, which provides the same view at an earlier time or different season or a video story about the ideas behind the place where you find yourself. If you get lost, call up the plan in the upper right to see where you stand. Occasionally, you encounter Sven-Ingvar Andersson: planting, weeding, sitting in the gazebo, in his house.

The slippage in time, experienced in the interactive tour, mirrors the experience that I have at Marnas, and which Andersson himself most certainly had. When I look down a passage or into a garden room, I see not only what is there before me in the present, but also remembered glimpses of past appearance.
Part 3

The Eye Is a Door

*Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field* (2008)

*The Eye Is a Door: Landscape, Photography, and the Art of Discovery* (2014)

To see is the root of idea, linguistically and literally: the word *idea* comes from the Greek *idein*, to see. Seeing is a creative act, the eye a door to discovery.

My work on photography as a form of inquiry has opened up new avenues for arts- and design-based research.

Visual thinking underlies all of my work, and it is the focus of *Daring to Look* and *The Eye Is a Door*. The practice of photography, from its roots in science to its flowering as an art form, has been a way of thinking and a method of discovery. A photograph can embody a complete thought or an entire story; a series of photographs can shape a narrative or make an argument. Words tap the ideas that the visual holds and carry them further.
Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field

“Daring to Look exemplifies Spirn’s particular combination of genius, hard work and humility. The idea of following up on Dorothea Lange’s field notes, and revisiting and re-photographing the places Lange made into icons of the depression years is ingenious, so simple that one wonders why no one thought of it before, and brilliant because no one has… By mobilizing the passage of time in Daring to Look, the book brings out the artistic power of Lange’s eye for the landscape and the society shaping it, and the continuing relevancy of Lange’s insights as refocused through Spirn’s own lens.”

KENNETH OLWIG, Professor; Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Daring to Look presents never-before-published texts and photographs by the great American photographer, Dorothea Lange. Her images and words of 1939 are a mirror that reflects who we were, how we came to be, and what we were in the process of becoming. In them, one can perceive practices and policies of the past as the roots of today’s environmental challenges. “No country has ever closely scrutinized itself visually,” Lange said at the end of her life, “I know what we could make of it if people only thought we could dare look at ourselves.” Lange did dare to look, and she raised questions that demand answering, still.

Lange ranks among the greatest American photographers, but, until now, her rich architecture and landscape material was virtually unpublished. She has been known almost solely as a photographer of people. Yet, in almost half of the photographs Lange took in 1939, no people appear at all. “Nobody ever gave me any credit for making any landscapes,” she declared in 1964. “I did make landscapes, loads of them!” Lange photographed landscape in the original and most profound sense of the word, in the mutual shaping of people and place.

This book is the first to restore Lange’s work to its full context by reproducing the text of her field reports (which she called general captions) together with the images she captured on film. Collectively, Lange’s words and images reveal her ambition: to document “people in their relations to their institutions, to their fellowmen, and to the land.”
Daring to Look has won awards from diverse organizations: EDRA recognized it as a book that “advances critical understanding of place and helps foster the design of excellent environments”; the Foundation for Landscape Studies honored it for its basis “on original research” and for “breaking new ground in method or interpretation,” and the American Association of Publishers for its excellence in scholarship. The book has reached a broad audience, including the entire freshman class of Bryant University who read it for a course required of all freshmen.

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Lange used her camera as "a tool of research." To accomplish this, she grouped photographs by subject, then cross-referenced and "buttressed" them with words. She first developed the general caption in 1939 as a framework within which to cross-list individual photographs and field notes and give them context. Each stands as a portrait of a moment, a place, a group of people, a theme; together, they paint a portrait of rural land and society in America and of the forces transforming them at the height of the Great Depression. In all these places, Lange saw and recorded the processes reshaping American lives and landscapes.

* Daring to Look* has three parts: an analysis of Lange’s innovations and methods and their significance, Lange’s groupings of images and words, and an account of my own journey to all the places she portrayed in 1939 and what I found there.
Lange’s words and photographs speak eloquently to the present, for the forces she saw and recorded in 1939 are still in play, of that particular moment, but not of a moment only. In my travels to the places she photographed in 1939, I found much that was different, but also much that was the same. Her images have past sources and future manifestations. They reveal the heartrending consequences of shifts in jobs and decline in industry and their impact on the environment, the human stress of migration and resettlement. They show that all large-scale events, policies, and plans have a human face. ‘If you see mainly massed human misery in my photographs and decry the selection of so much suffering,’ Lange wrote, ‘I have failed to show the multiform pattern of which it is a reflection. For the havoc before your eyes is the result of both natural and social forces. These are my times, and they, too, are my theme,’ she said. They are mine as well, which is what drew me to Dorothea Lange, to her “lost” photographs and texts, and led me to revisit all the places where she worked in 1939: to discover what the changes between then and now might reveal about the nation.

In Nyssa, Oregon, I found the faded mural that Lange had photographed in 1939. But where businesses were thriving in 1939, many were failing in 2005.
Above Farms that had been laboriously cleared and planted in the cut-over forests of eastern Washington in 1939, were reclaimed by forest by 2005.

Following pages Lange is regarded as a photographer of people, but I discovered that, in 1939, almost half of her photographs were of architecture and landscapes, with no people at all. These three photographs of northern Idaho are part of a much longer series.

“Dorothea Lange is one of America’s greatest documentary photographers. Daring to Look is a very important book. It provides a fascinating insight into her FSA photographs and writings during that time. Ms. Lange’s photographs, especially the work she did for the FSA were a great inspiration for so many photographers, including myself.” MARY ELLEN MARK, photographer

“As a historian, the first aspect of the book that leaps out at me is the thorough and imaginative research in a variety of sources and the broad contextualization in both public policy and social and economic history. The other aspect that leaps out simultaneously… is just how beautifully it is produced. It is such a pleasure just to hold and look through. Anne Whiston Spirn’s introduction makes Lange come alive, places her in her time, and just skewers those who would diminish her achievements…. And the end, returning to find the places she photographed, was a brilliant idea, and Spirn draws the circle with great sensitivity.” MICHAEL KATZ, Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania
130. October 22, 1939. Bonner County, Idaho. Shows character of land which new settlers are buying in the Priest River Valley.

132. (Facing, bottom) October 22, 1939. Priest River Peninsula, Bonner County, Idaho. Shows log home. Farm established 6 years ago.

131. (Above) October 21, 1939. Bonner County, Idaho. This farm has been occupied by four different families since 1936:

- Claude Sargeant '36-37 failed
- Lenny Davis '38 failed
- Roy Silton '38-39 failed
- Davy Walker '39

The soil is sandy and the effort of clearing has been wasted.
A website, www.daringtolook.com provides a window into Dorothea Lange’s 1939 work and the fate of the places she photographed. “Lange” offers audio clips of Lange discussing her approach to photography. “1939” shows photographs of every day Lange was in the field during that year. “Stories” displays a selection of Lange’s General Captions about places and families, along with my stories of those families and places today. “Then and Now” compares Lange’s photographs of 1939 with the same people and places today. The website has expanded the audience further, especially among youth, like the high school junior from Maryland who emailed on January 31, 2011:

“I was so moved by this website that I had to write to you. I just wanted to say thank you so much for doing such important work. It is really inspiring—this website is beautiful and was incredibly helpful for my research project on social boundaries and quandaries during the thirties. I was surprised to read that we share all of these interests—photography, but also environmental design and urban design. I am considering both as a major for undergrad!
Your fan, Zane”
What became of the place and the people Lange portrayed in 1939?

I decided to see for myself. The journey took me to places I might never have gone, to people I would never have met.

My discoveries are described in the book DARING TO LOOK: what I found, whom I met and what they told me, what happened to families Lange photographed, what has and has not changed over the intervening decades, and what significance Lange’s work of 1939 holds for the present day.

Here are some of the photographs I took, alongside those Lange made of the same places in 1939.

To see the photographs side by side, select view all. To explore the photographs on a map, choose a region.

CLICK HERE to view image gallery.

CLICK HERE to view images located on a map.

DATE: May 17, 2005
LOCATION: Nyssa, Malheur County, OR
DESCRIPTION: Across from the vacant Hotel Western, I spotted a sign Lange photographed on the side of the Daylee Irrigation District Office. The office is still there, but the boxes that once displayed the names of local merchants are blank. Many buildings in Nyssa are vacant, yet well maintained, like the Hotel...
Daring to Look

Dorothea Lange is known as one of the greatest American photographers, but she was also a remarkable observer whose field notes have largely remained unpublished until now. In Daring to Look, Anne Whiston Spirn, a landscape architect, photographer, and writer herself, has edited Lange's field notes, adding her own interpretative essays on Lange's work, and rephotographing some of Lange's sites. This is a very important book deserving wide readership because it provides a wonderful combination of the socially-conscious work of two gifted artists and writers.

DOLORES HAYDEN, Professor of Architecture, Urbanism, and American Studies, Yale University

As a lifelong friend of Dorothea Lange, I was absolutely astounded and thoroughly pleased with Daring to Look. Anne Whiston Spirn has hit the nail on the head: she knows the secret of understanding good photography — and of understanding Dorothea Lange's life as well. An astonishing book.

RONDAL PARTIDGE, photographer and former assistant to Lange

The book was widely reviewed in print (e.g. LA Times, New York Review of Books), online (e.g. New Yorker, Bookforum), and on radio (e.g. NPR's "All Things Considered" and "Here and Now"). The book has reached a broad audience: the hardcover edition (5,000 copies) sold out within nine months, and the paperback has sold more than that.
“What a sui generis and beautiful imagination (and manifestation) of a book: paean, recontextualization, historicizing, rediscovery, documentation, investigation and collaboration. It is its own genre, and so lavishly produced; the writing is sharp as a bird’s beak, poetic and exacting. And Spirn’s own photographs make good company beside those of Lange. I loved reading her notes, feeling the picture take on even more weight that way. My wife and I both lived in this book those last weeks of summer.”

FORREST GANDER, poet and Professor of Comparative Literature, Brown University
The Eye Is a Door: Landscape, Photography, and the Art of Discovery

Anne Whiston Spirn
The Eye Is a Door:
Landscape, Photography, and the Art of Discovery

"Spirn’s new book is both beautiful to look at and enlightening to read….She draws attention to the potential for design, both for good and for bad purposes. She points us towards the stories that surround us and the patterns which envelop us. In short, she makes us see again…. Few people have been able to so consistently produce work that changes the lives of people throughout the world. Her ability to direct our attention to that which is both invisible and right before us … is unparalleled."

CHRIS AIKEN, Choreographer; Director of MFA Program, Smith College

The book’s topics are central to design: landscape’s stories and the sense of place; lights of day, in season, in place; what color tells; significant detail; the art of visual thinking. There is a growing interest in the practice of design and art as a form of research; The Eye Is a Door contributes to this discussion as does my course, Sensing Place: Photography as Inquiry, which was an incubator for the book.

The Eye Is a Door invites the reader to see more acutely and to explore the practice of photography as a tool of discovery. Why a door and not a window? A window is something to look through, but a doorway is to pass through; crossing a threshold, one enters a new place. To see, to really see, is to open a door. To pass through that door is to arrive at a new understanding. Thus the titles of the book’s three parts: Threshold (an essay of photographs), The Open Door (an essay of words), and Passage (an essay of photographs).

The Eye Is a Door is an original e-book. The book’s photographs are the subject of a major exhibition at the Smith College Museum of Art from January–August 2014, complemented by an across-the-curriculum program on photography, landscape, and the art of visual thinking, which is recorded on www.theeyeisadoor.com. The exhibit is traveling to other venues.

SPONSORS
National Endowment for the Arts
John Simon Guggenheim Foundation
University of Pennsylvania
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Smith College Museum of Art

More than 60,000 visits from around the world to the Sensing Place website, increasing by 19,000 in the past year alone, MIT Open Courseware Portal, 2011

“Generates an unprecedented dynamic dialogue between author and reader.”
Landscape Journal

Left Publishing the The Eye Is a Door as an e-book made possible the low price of $4.99
The Eye Is a Door: The E-Book

The Eye Is a Door is an interplay of images and words. The book’s two photographic essays embrace a central text of short chapters. The first visual essay explores the sense of place. The second, which concludes the book, contains more complex photographic pairings that plot a sequence of ideas, an argument for a language of landscape. Eight chapters of text are a counterpoint to the photo essays. Images and words correspond, but a single photograph represents more than a single idea or story, and each photographic pair and sequence of pairs has its own logic.

Designing The Eye Is a Door as an e-book permitted a fluid relationship between image and text, where neither dominates the other. The reader encounters the same image within the context of both visual and verbal essays, and a single image may appear in the text at several different points. Rather than paging back and forth, simply touch an icon at the end of a sentence, and the associated image fills the screen. Touch again and return to the text. A new kind of reading. There are additional advantages to the e-book. Move directly from text or image, through embedded links, to referenced websites. Customize font type and size with “reflowable” text. Since The Eye Is a Door has reflowable text rather than a fixed format, it works well on a smart phone, easily carried as a reference in the field.

With its many color photographs, a print edition of The Eye Is a Door would have been priced beyond the reach of many readers. As an e-book, it is priced at $4.99.
world, waiting to be read. Some, like earth’s shadow, are cosmic, others are mundane. I search for both, and for the processes that drive the narratives, to discover the patterns that underlie them. I look for places where process creates a pattern that transcends scale, where I can appreciate how similar processes shape the local landscape, the earth, and the universe, like a “galaxy” of sea foam. Where human settlement and the landscape’s own deep structure correspond (The Ridgeway [1], High Plains [2]), Where people have shaped and arranged landscape to express identity and idea (Kongonshus [3]), Where cultures have acknowledged the power of place (Uluru [4]). To learn to read the stories in landscape, I looked first for places easily read: seashores, deserts, mountains; the sacred landscapes of memorials, cemeteries, places of worship; political landscapes, as in Washington, D.C. Such landscape primes prepared me for more complex readings, as in the Scottish Highlands, the Salton Sea, the Black Bottom of West Philadelphia — all of which hold dark, overlapping stories of natural and human history. Some places have unusual power to stir

Introduction

SEEING IS FOR ME A WAY OF KNOWING, photography a way of thinking. I see most acutely through the frame of the camera’s viewfinder and think most fluently through images. The camera is my third eye, its sensor a third
The Eye Is a Door explores visual thinking as an art of pattern-seeking, of culling the significant from a welter of the irrelevant or peripheral. Significant detail, alone and in combination, exposes a larger pattern. I look around, alert for anomalies—things out of place or from another time, a break in pattern, clues to a hidden order or a meaning overlooked. Photographers seek significant detail as metaphor to stand for a larger whole, to hint at the deeper meaning beneath the surface, to tell a story. So do designers.

“The Eye Is a Door begins a new conversation in a time of artistic volatility when media are being invented, redefined, and combined. Anne Whiston Spirn speaks to us in a unique and magical convergence of images and words seen from an entirely new perspective, and invites us to join the conversation. I promise you, it is not one to miss.” WILL STEACY, photographer, 2011 PDN 30 under 30
Visual thinking is an art of pattern-seeking, of culling the significant from a welter of the irrelevant or peripheral. Significant detail, alone and in combination, exposes a larger pattern. I look around, alert for anomalies—things out of place or from another time, a break in pattern, clues to a hidden order or a meaning overlooked. Photographers seek significant detail as metaphor to stand for a larger whole, to hint at the deeper meaning beneath the surface, to tell a story. So do designers.

“Spirm shows readers how to make thinking with photographs a do-able, teachable skill. Everyone who works with photographs, no matter how experienced they are, will come away from the book with new ideas and sensitivities.”

HOWARD S. BECKER, sociologist, author of *Telling About Society*
For every person, the eye is a door. What one finds beyond that door depends on what is there, and what one has the skill to see, but also on what one wants to understand. Beyond my own eye’s door are landscapes, the stories they tell, and the ideas they embody. I pass through the eye’s door and see: that the natural and the human are one, continuous not separate, landscape a mutual shaping of people and place and a form of language born out of living, a language with which to tell new stories and to envision how to adapt human settlements in life-sustaining ways.

“A series of clear essays and suites of superb photographs ... an aid to understanding and living intensely.” LAURIE OLIN, founder of OLIN
The Promise and Problems of the Visual E-Book:

Call for an Alliance between Authors and Librarians

Anna Wetterberg, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Abigail Wood, Harvard University

Introduction

Research and scholarship in the visual arts and design fields are dynamic and innovative, using new ways of exploring and understanding photography and visual culture. This leads to new forms of publishing and new ideas about how to engage with the public. The promise of the visual E-book is to make images and text more accessible, allowing for immediate interaction with the content and the visual elements of the book. However, the challenges are significant, and the potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation are real. This article explores the potential of the visual E-book and how it can be used to enhance the experience of reading and learning.

The E-book has the potential to transform the way we read and learn, providing access to a wide range of resources and materials. The visual E-book is particularly useful for those who are visually impaired or who have difficulty reading traditional print materials. It also offers a new way of engaging with the material, allowing for a more interactive and immersive experience.

The E-book also presents new challenges, such as the need for a wider range of accessible technologies and the need for better integration with existing systems. These challenges must be addressed to ensure that the full potential of the visual E-book is realized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the visual E-book has the potential to revolutionize the way we read and learn, providing access to a wide range of resources and materials. The challenges are significant, but with the right tools and strategies, we can ensure that the full potential of the visual E-book is realized.
The Eye Is a Door has been recognized as an important contribution to debates on the future of the book and as an innovative prototype for the richly-illustrated electronic book, which redesigns the flow between images and words.

Facing page (above)  Featured in Art Documentation, the journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America, fall 2014.

Right and facing page (below)  Featured in Architecture Boston, summer 2014, in print and on the Web.
The Eye Is a Door: Exhibit

This major exhibition, organized by the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, Massachusetts, explores how my photographs “encourage a deeper understanding of the natural and built environment through the development of visual literacy — the ability to read and analyze visual information.”

The museum’s education department has developed a range of educational materials associated with the exhibit in order to teach visual literacy and landscape literacy to a broad audience. A wide range of courses at Smith will use the exhibit: from landscape studies and art to environmental studies and geology, to anthropology, literary studies, history and dance. The museum is also an educational resource for colleges nearby (Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Hampshire, and the University of Massachusetts) and for K-12 schools in central Massachusetts and has an active community outreach program.

The exhibit was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. After SCMA (January 31–August 31, 2014), the exhibit is now traveling to other museums.

“Simultaneously gorgeous and chaste … There’s a matter-of-fact flawlessness to these photographs.”

MARK FEENEY, The Boston Globe
**INTRODUCTION**

This exhibition showcases the photographic work of world-renowned writer, scholar, and landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn. The author of several important books on landscape, Spirn is known for her multidisciplinary practice that evolves from her photographic work. Her new book, *The Eye Is a Door: Landscape, Photography, and the Art of Discovery*, features this work and describes her approach.

This is the first major exhibition to explore how Spirn’s photographs encourage a deeper understanding of the natural and man-made environment through the development of visual literacy—the ability to read and analyze visual information. This approach to learning allows people to question and interpret what they see, which has broad implications across many fields of inquiry and design.

Spirn views photography as a tool that helps hone this ability by focusing attention on significant details in the landscape in order to discover the invisible. She has been on the forefront of the movement to make this kind of visual thinking a fundamental part of people’s daily lives.

As a teaching museum, Smith College Museum of Art is dedicated to nurturing visual literacy in an interdisciplinary environment.

Produced over the past 35 years, the images in the exhibition capture stories and ideas embodied in places the artist has visited for her research, which range from the volcanic landscapes of Iceland to sacred Buddhist gardens in Japan.

The 46 color images featured in *THE EYE IS A DOOR* connect such diverse topics as geology, biology, astronomy, anthropology, engineering, architecture, history, literary studies, global studies, studio art, and landscape studies.

For further information about this exhibition visit smith.edu/artmuseum

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**THINKING VISUALLY WITH LANDSCAPE**

I ideas to consider when viewing this exhibition.

**Observation**

What do you see?

Take a visual inventory and make note of details that stand out to you.

**Interpretation**

What is going on in the image?

How do the details you noticed connect to create a larger whole?

What patterns or anomalies can you discover?

**Building a Narrative**

What story does the image tell?

What can the connections and patterns you discovered tell you about the history and life of this place?

What parts of the story do you still wonder about?

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Why a door and not a window? A window is something to look through, but a doorway is to pass through; crossing a threshold, one enters a new place. To see, to really see, is to open a door. To pass through that door is to arrive at a new understanding.
Top  Smith College Museum of Art. A wide range of courses at Smith used the exhibit: from art to environmental studies and geology, to anthropology, literary studies, history and dance. The exhibit was also used in teaching visual literacy to K-12 classes.

Bottom  University of Arkansas, School of Architecture.

Theater & art

Anne Whiston Spirn makes a sense of place visible

By Mark Feeney  GLOBE STAFF  FEBRUARY 25, 2014

NORTHAMPTON — Anne Whiston Spirn wants to be clear about her choice of metaphor. "A window is something to look through," Spirn has said, "but a doorway is to pass through; crossing a threshold, one enters a new place." A sense of place deeply informs "The Eye Is a Door: Landscape Photographs by Anne Whiston Spirn." The show runs through Aug. 31 at the Smith College Museum of Art.

Those places range from very near to very far: Nahant, where Spirn lives, Japan, Australia, Iceland, Sweden, Britain, France, the American West. There are 47 color photographs in the show, and at least seven have doorways or entrances in them. Spirn, who teaches landscape architecture and planning at MIT, took the images between 1978 to 2013, yet dates seem irrelevant. All of them suggest a timeless quality. Or, rather, they seem so specifically in the given moment that Spirn took them that they stand outside of time. "Finding the place to stand may be a matter of inches as of years," she's written.

While never making her colors seem unnatural or hyped, Spirn gets the utmost out of them. So many of her images manage to be simultaneously gorgeous and chaste. There's a matter-of-fact flawlessness to these photographs. Declining to call attention to itself, that flawlessness is felt more than seen. The blue in "North Head, Sydney, Australia" is such a blue. The subtlety of the interplay between green (vegetation) and red (soil) in "Uluru, Central Desert, Australia" is quite marvelous. A barn, in "Sidra Sandby, Sweden" offers its own transporting interplay of those colors: red eaves above, green grass below, and patterning of stone walls and darkness of doors in between.
Seeing is a way of knowing, photography a way of thinking.

To photograph mindfully is to look and think, to open a door between what can be seen directly and what is hidden and can only be imagined.

Beyond my own eye’s door are landscapes, the stories they tell, and the ideas they embody. I pass through that door and see that the natural and the human are one, continuous not separate, landscape a mutual shaping of people and place and a form of language born out of living, a language with which to tell new stories and to envision how to adapt human settlements in life-sustaining ways.

The Eye Is a Door: The Web Site

The Eye Is a Door website (www.theeyeisadoor.com) complements the e-book. Read sample chapters. View the photo essays. Visit the exhibit and read the reviews. Watch a video. Take a trip to the places depicted in the photographs. The latter section, Journey, links photographs and associated text with Google Earth. Click on a photograph and be transported to a satellite view of the place, where you can take control of the mouse and explore on your own.
Left  Home page  
(www.theeyeisadoor.com)

Right  An innovative website pairs text and photographs, links them to Google Earth, and invites the visitor to travel to places described in the book. Sample journeys, from top to bottom: Start the Journey; Uluru, Australia; Parc de Sceaux, Paris, France.
More than 60,000 visits from around the world to the Sensing Place website since 2011, through the MIT Open Courseware Portal alone. Visits through that portal are on the increase: ca. 19,000 in the past year. The website has been online since 2000.

Sensing Place: Photography as Inquiry

“Sensing Place,” a course that explores photography as a disciplined way of seeing, of investigating landscapes and expressing ideas, was a laboratory for The Eye Is a Door. Students learn to see and think with both a critical and a creative eye, to reason with images as well as with words, to question dogma and discover ideas. The class website is a framework for learning where students’ insights grow out of their independent and collective work (architecture.mit.edu/class/landphoto). Students post their work online so it can be seen and discussed by others. Since the work of each year’s class is archived online, current students learn from past students too. The website is open to the public, and a version is included on MIT’s OpenCourseware, where it has received more than 60,000 visits from around the world. Many teachers and photographers describe how they have adapted aspects of “Sensing Place” in their own work.
“Anne is one of those rare people who truly works in multiple disciplines and who truly makes vital contributions to each. She is a photographer/artist. She is a landscape architect. She is an author. She is a teacher. It is in this last capacity that we first got to know Anne personally as we took her “Sense of Place” class while Loeb Fellows at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Her passion, knowledge, discipline and commitment were apparent from the beginning. Anne taught us how to read landscape in a new way—using the tools and vernacular of literary criticism to break down its elements and to see how the historical, political and aesthetic qualities of place inform each other. This technical lesson in how to see ecologically has been transformative in the way we approach our own work. More importantly, however, was the spirit of learning and respect for life that Anne imbued in every student in the class. It was obvious that we were not the only ones that came out changed and deeply enhanced by Anne’s teaching.”

**SUSANNAH SAYLOR AND ED MORRIS**, Co-Founders, The Canary Project
Open access to information and knowledge is essential to democracy. The importance of open access cannot be overstated, especially at a time when knowledge (books, articles, databases) is increasingly owned by for-profit corporations.

I was a leader in open access before there was a movement. By fighting to retain the rights to my publications, I have managed to reserve the right to freely distribute my published essays. Since the debut of my first website in March 1996, I have made my work freely accessible online. Millions of people from more than 90 countries have visited these websites to view and download my articles, research reports, maps, videos, and course syllabi.
Screenshots from the homepage (2012).Scrolling down, a series of panels introduces diverse aspects of my work and provides links to material in the archive, such as publications, designs, photographs, radio broadcasts, videos, and course syllabi.
2000–present

annewhistonspirn.com

“As one of our country’s leading design thinkers, Anne Spirn… has a global reputation as the preeminent scholar working at the intersection of landscape architecture and environmental planning. Her seminal scholarly research and elegant writing applies ecological principles to urban settings, and she has also developed a parallel community-based research agenda that has gained national and international attention. Her work creatively bridges across design, community and economic development, and environmental policy. She has been exceptionally effective in conveying her ideas to a broader public, both through web design and her insistence on open access publication.”

LAWRENCE VALE, Professor of Urban Design and Planning, MIT

This website is a gateway to my work and activities. It is an expression of my commitment to make information and ideas freely accessible. Here, one can read my publications, listen to interviews, see exhibits, and visit classes. One can follow work-in-progress and travel back in time to a studio class in 1996. The major sections are Author, Photographer, Landscape Architect, and Teacher.

Teacher  The Web transformed the way I teach design. Since 1996, I have crafted for each course a website as a framework for learning, a forum for presenting work, sharing ideas, and extending discussion beyond the classroom. It delighted me when a student in one class used the website for one of my other classes as a resource to explore how people can learn to “see the invisible.” Each class website features the course syllabus and assignments and showcases all student work. Each year’s work is archived on the class site, where it serves as a resource for future classes.

These are public sites, requiring no passwords, so all are welcome to visit; since 1996 there have been millions of visits. Among those visitors are public officials, some of whom have been persuaded by my students’ designs to take a new approach to a pressing problem. The designs produced in a succession of studios in 1996, 1997, and 1999 on “Transforming the Urban Landscape” (all still online), for example, helped persuade engineers at the Philadelphia Water Department to pioneer a revolutionary approach to improving water quality, which is now receiving national attention. Websites also tied together The Mill Creek Project, a collaboration with an inner-city middle school, which was cited in 2004 as a model for Internet-based learning activities.
Screenshots from the homepage (2012). Scrolling down, a series of panels introduces diverse aspects of my work and provides links to material in the archive, such as publications, designs, photographs, radio broadcasts, videos, and course syllabi.
**Landscape Architect**  Much of the knowledge of design and planning practice lies in ephemeral publications, which are rarely collected by libraries. This section presents professional reports and research monographs to which I have contributed, which can be downloaded. Starting with *Site Planning Guidelines for Woodlands New Community* from 1973, they include reports from landmark projects conducted by Wallace McHarg Roberts and Todd in the 1970s, for which I was a project director.

**Photographer**  Explorations and reflections on seeing as a way of knowing and photography as a way of thinking are presented here, along with exhibits, interviews, and reviews.

**Author**  My work is published in the journals and books of diverse fields, from landscape architecture, architecture, and planning, to history and geography, science, art and art history. This website brings them together, where they can be read and downloaded. I am able to do this because, over the course of my career, I retained the rights to all but two essays. I also hold the electronic rights for all but my last book (*Daring to Look*), and am publishing them as inexpensive e-books. I established Wolf Tree Press to accomplish this.
“The Conquest of Arid America”

From: International Journal of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design
2007/95

It was late July up on Dead Ox Flat in eastern Oregon, just past sunrise. The air cool, no hint of the heat to come (4/20 Celsius by afternoon). Sound of sage. Sound of water gushing from eight hundred canals. The land was desert in the nineteenth century when the wagons numbered along the Oregon Trail made their way here, and Dead Ox Flat was still desert in 1936 when the great photographer Dorothea Lange photographed the Malheur Reservoir. built in 1937 to irrigate the water that transformed sagebrush desert into fields of alfalfa, corn, and sugar beets.

“Six years ago national irrigation was a dream; today the dream has come true.” William E. Smythe wrote in 1939 in the foreword to a revised edition of his 1899 book The Conquest of Arid America. Smythe’s “dream come true” was the National Reclamation

“This project [the West Philadelphia Landscape Project] demonstrates the links between environmental issues, education and heritage, and is a model for Ottawa as it seeks to comprehensively implement a ‘green city’ strategy.”

— City of Ottawa, Canada

Action

Landscape architects design and plan landscape at scales from garden to region. Read more...
Part 4 / The Open Door

Anne Whiston Spirn
Author  Photographer  Landscape Architect  Teacher

The Eye Is a Door
The Eye Is a Door: Photography and the Art of Visual Thinking is a book and an exhibit. The book of nine essays and approximately sixty images will be published in February 2014. An exhibit at the Smith College Museum of Art opens January 31-August 31, 2014. These photographs provide an introduction.

Daring to Look: The Continuing Story
My book Daring to Look: Dorothya Lange’s Photographs and Report from the Field (2008) is published, but the project refuses to be finished. Since 2005 I have traveled to all the places Lange photographed in 1939. The stories Lange told in 1939 are still unfolding somehow, in the process of tracing her stories, they became my own.

Calendars
Every year, I make a calendar, and, once in a while, someone sends a photo of the calendar in its. Click on the photographs to enter their worlds.

Anne Whiston Spirn
Author  Photographer  Landscape Architect  Teacher

Transforming the Urban Landscape
Penn

THE MILL CREEK PROJECT
In fall 1995, my students at the University of Pennsylvania and I embarked on an adventure with teachers and students at the Shuberger Middle School in West Philadelphia. Our goal was to explore how a new curriculum organized around “The Urban Watershed” could combine learning, community development, and water resource management.

Read more...
1995. Starting Small
1996. Launching an Experiment
2000-2001. Transition
Where Are They Now?
Curriculum Vitae
Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

Radcliffe College, Harvard University, A.B. 1969 cum laude
University of Pennsylvania, Master of Landscape Architecture, 1974

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

MIT
Cecil and Ida Green Distinguished Professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning, 2017–present; Professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning, Departments of Architecture and Urban Studies and Planning, 2000–2017

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Director, Landscape Architecture Program, 1984–1986; Associate Professor, 1983–1986; Assistant Professor, 1979–1983

SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS
Honor Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, 2011
Honorary Doctorate, Swedish Agricultural University, Uppsala, 2010
Model Scholar, Urban Studies Program, Stanford University, 2010
John Brinckerhoff Jackson Book Prize, 2009
Great Place Book Award, 2009
PROSE Book Award, American Association of Publishers, Honorable Mention, Art and Art History Category, 2009
Art Book Award, Finalist, Association of Art Historians, 2009
National Design Award: Finalist, 2002
International Cosmos Prize for “contributions to the harmonious coexistence of nature and humankind,” 2001
University of California, Humanities Research Institute: Fellow, 1994
University of Sydney, Australia: Ethel Chettle Distinguished Fellow, 1988
American Society of Landscape Architects: Fellow, 2004; Honor Award for
Daring to Look, 2011; Community Service Award, 2004;
President's Award of Excellence for The Granite Garden, 1984
White House Conference, Imagining America: Model Project, 1999
Philadelphia School District: Person of the Month, 1998
International Architecture Book Award, American Institute of Architects, 1996
Ozzie Award for Excellence in Design, 1989

SELECTED BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

DESIGN REVIEW AND SELECTION COMMITTEES
U.S. General Services Administration, National Register of Peer Professionals,
1998–present; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1997;

DESIGN ADVISORY COMMITTEES
Task Force on Site Character, Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House,

DESIGN AWARDS JURIES
U.S. General Services Administration Design Awards; EDRA Awards, ASLA
Design Awards, ASLA Research and Publication Awards; Bruner Award; James
Ritchie Award, Jury Chair; Minnesota State Capitol Design Competition; New
Orleans Arboretum Design Competition; Hillside Housing Design Competition, Cincinnati

BOARDS OF DIRECTORS
Boston Natural Areas Fund, 2000–2002; Fairmount Park Art Association,
1992–2002

EDITORIAL BOARDS
Landscape History, 2010–present; Landscape Journal, 2003–present; Landscape

OECD, PARIS
Panel of Experts, Program on The Ecological City, 1993; Chairman, Panel of
Experts, Ministerial Conference on the Economic, Social, and Environmental
Problems of Cities, 1992
CITY OF PHILADELPHIA


DESIGN PRACTICE

West Philadelphia Landscape Project: Director, 1987–present (see www.wplp.net)

City of Boston Consultant on urban design strategies, 1984–1985; consultant to on reuse of vacant urban land, 1984–1985

Registered Landscape Architect: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, CLARB 1979

Firms Wallace McHarg Roberts & Todd, Philadelphia, 1973–1977;

SELEcTED PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS


C. Th. Sørensen: Garden Artist, by Sven-Ingvar Andersson and Steen Høyer.

SELECTED CHAPTERS IN BOOKS


SELECTED ARTICLES


“From Uluru to Cooper’s Place: Patterns in the Cultural Landscape.” Orion (Spring 1990).


“Landscape Planning and the City,” Landscape and Urban Planning 13 (1986).


SELECTED MONOGRAPHS


**World Wide Web Publications**

Anne Whiston Spirn ([www.annewhistonspirn.com](http://www.annewhistonspirn.com)), 2008–present

*The West Philadelphia Landscape Project* ([www.wplp.net](http://www.wplp.net)), 1996–present, seven awards for design excellence and millions of hits from over 90 countries.

*Daring to Look* ([www.daringtolook.com](http://www.daringtolook.com)), 2008–present

*The Eye Is a Door* ([www.theeyeisadoor.com](http://www.theeyeisadoor.com)), 2012–present

*The Granite Garden* ([www.granitegarden.net](http://www.granitegarden.net)), 2016–present


**Photography Exhibitions**

*The Eye Is a Door: Landscape Photographs by Anne Whiston Spirn*: Smith College Museum of Art, 2014; University of Arkansas, fall 2014.


**Selected Documentaries and Interviews**


Philadelphia School District Cable TV Station, 30-minute feature on my work at Sulzberger Middle School, aired daily throughout November 1998.
“Building the Urban Landscape: Anne Whiston Spirn Talks with Hubert Murray.” Architecture Boston, Fall 2001, 43–47.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES AND LECTURES

SELECTED KEYNOTE LECTURES
International Federation of Landscape Architects, The Netherlands; German Historical Institute, Conference on Urban Nature; Cosmos Prize Symposium on my work, Tokyo and Osaka; Japanese Institute of Landscape Architects, Tokyo; International Federation of Landscape Architects, Florence; Conference on Small Cities, Kamloops, Canada; International Conference on “Between Garden Art and Urban Planning,” Copenhagen.

SELECTED INVITED LECTURES AND PAPERS
Conference on Landscape in Theory, University of Nottingham; Symposium on Landscape Theory, Burren College of Art, Ireland; Doorenbos Lecture, The Hague; World Park Conference, Nagoya; Landscape of Urban Parks, Osaka; Ordering the Human-Built World, Berlin; The Ecological City, OECD; The Social, Economic, and Environmental Future of Cities, Paris; City and Nature, University of Odense; The Global Environment and the City, Osaka; City Planning Association, Tokyo; World Conference on Landscape Planning, Hannover; The Urban Landscape, Ljubljana; International Union of Architects/Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Sydney; Congres Mondiale des Cités- Unies, Montreal; Green Cities Conference, Liverpool.

UNIVERSITIES
SciencesPo, Paris; Architects’ Association, London; Manchester University; University of Nottingham; Royal Danish Academy of Art; Danish Agricultural University; University of Copenhagen; Swedish Agricultural University; Helsinki Technical University; University of Aarhus; University of Sydney; University of New South Wales; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology; Technical University of Delft; Wageningen Agricultural University; Queens University, Belfast; University of Granada, Spain.
SELECTED KEYNOTE AND PLENARY TALKS

Planners Network Conference, Minneapolis; International Association of Landscape Ecologists, Tempe; American Society of Landscape Architects Centennial Conference, Boston; Cary Conference, Institute of Ecosystem Studies; Conference on Environmental Quality for Public Officials, Cambridge; Society of Soil and Water Conservation Annual Meeting, Lexington; ACSA Teachers’ Workshop, Cranbrook Academy of Art (conference chair); Conference on Ecology and Planning, University of California, Davis; Xeriscape, Sacramento; Urban Air Pollution, Colorado Springs; Leadership Meeting on Urban Ecology, Denver.

SELECTED INVITED LECTURES AND PAPERS


CONFERENCES AND LECTURES AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

Harvard University; Yale University; University of Chicago; Massachusetts Institute of Technology; University of Pennsylvania; University of Michigan; Stanford University; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Los Angeles; University of California, Davis; Cal Poly Pomona; University of Wisconsin; Cornell University; Arizona State University; University of Georgia; University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; Parsons School of Design; Rhode Island School of Design; University of Miami; University of Virginia; University of New Mexico; Ohio State University; University of Washington; Washington University; University of Tennessee; SUNY Buffalo; SUNY Syracuse; University of Oregon; University of Massachusetts; Catholic University; University of Missouri–St. Louis; Vassar College; Smith College; Mount Holyoke College; Boston College Law School; Tulane University, University of Colorado; American University; Bryant University, University of Arkansas.
“As one of our country’s leading design thinkers, Anne Spirn ... has a global reputation as the preeminent scholar working at the intersection of landscape architecture and environmental planning.”

LAWRENCE VALE, MIT

“I consider Anne the most important theorist of landscape architecture in the United States of the past 40 years, both in terms of the quality of her work and its influence.”

REUBEN RAINLEY, University of Virginia

“Taken together, as a related body of work, The Granite Garden, the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, and The Language of Landscape have no equal in value and significance to the city-building professions.”

IGNACIO BUNSTER, AECOM

“It was through her groundbreaking work that the City of Philadelphia can now boast being the Greenest City in America.”

HOWARD NEUKRUG, Commissioner, Philadelphia Water Department

“The most impressive aspect of Anne’s accomplishments has been the amazing diversity of disciplines in which she has excelled — including scholarship, design literature, teaching, and in professional practice, urban design, planning and landscape architecture. She has ... been a leader in the fusion of teaching and practice ... a major force in humanizing the cityscape with a quality of innovation that is economical, subtle rational, and infinitely satisfying.”

JAMES WINES, SITE

“My work — and the trajectory of my entire generation of landscape and urban designers and scholars — would not have taken its current direction without Spirn’s contributions. Her integration of practice and theory, her intellectual rigor, her innovative subjects, and her generosity as a scholar have made her a model, a mentor, and an inspiration for our discipline.”

JANE WOLFF, University of Toronto

“An entire generation of scholars, planners, designers, environmental activists and urban leaders have benefitted from Anne’s visionary and courageous leadership. Her lasting mark upon the landscape of American urban design is as indelible as it is inclusive. Every year, legions of scholars cite Anne’s work in their articles — a testament to her influence beyond architecture and planning. Her work elevates the value of design for people previously unaware of its importance and ubiquity.”

MATTHEW KLINGLE, Professor of History, Bowdoin College