

A Feminist View of Landscapes: A Partnership With Nature

By PAULA DEITZ

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass., April 24 — What do women who are landscape designers really want? A new landscape architecture that is ethical as well as esthetically pleasing.

That was the conclusion at a symposium, "Women, Land, Design," sponsored this weekend by the Radcliffe Seminars to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its landscape-design program. At the symposium, a feminist view emerged, not like the ponderous and theoretical gender studies that have dominated art history and literary studies in universities, but rather a lively discussion that focused on practical applications for shaping the future of the environment.

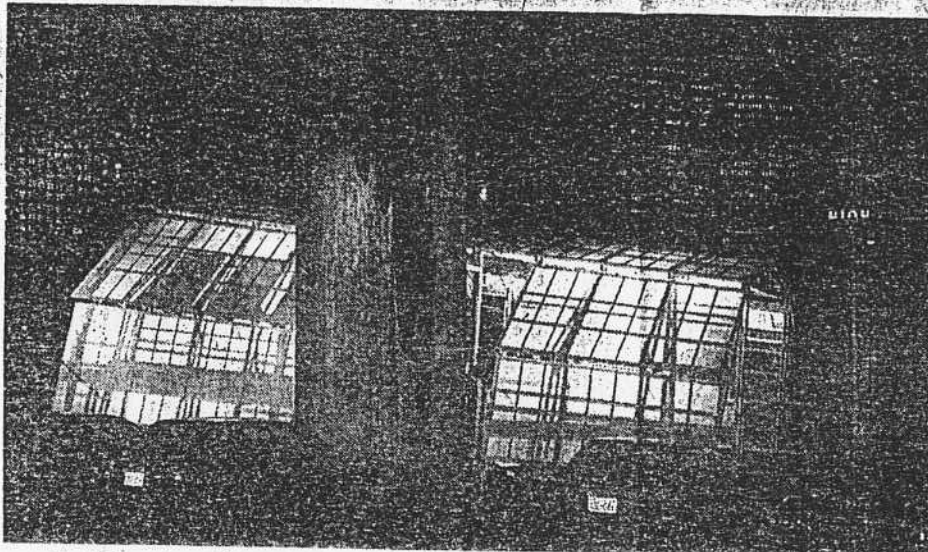
Setting the theme, Elizabeth Meyer, a landscape architect who teaches at the University of Virginia, dispelled the long-held image of landscape as merely a "soft or feminine frame" for architecture.

In the traditional view of culture versus nature (which she equated with male versus female), man's relationship to the land is one of stewardship rather than partnership, she pointed out.

"Control" was the word used pejoratively by Deborah E. Ryan, a landscape architect on the faculty of the University of North Carolina, to describe the Louis XIV school of landscape design, epitomized by Versailles. "It expresses man's dominance over the land," she said. "The majority of design work is still based on historical precedents rather than on an ideology that takes ecology and nature as process into consideration." Eco-feminism is the word she used for her new value system where ecology and design co-exist.

One successful historic example cited was the Fens in Boston, a waterway within the seven-mile spine of parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, known as the Emerald Necklace. People who enjoy the Fens for its beauty are not aware that this created landscape has now become an important eco-system.

Because conventional gardens and landscapes can also be cost prohibitive, today's landscape designers are challenged to use found materials, as Ms. Ryan did in the Playful Forest adjoining an elementary school in Charlotte, N.C. In a woodland devastated by Hurricane Hugo, she and her students designed a series of friendly pathways, incorporating pebble puddles and tree ladders that helped the children overcome their fear of the woods. (Another speaker, Margaret Dean Daiss, pointed out that in fairy tales, children are often being abandoned and frightened in the forest.)



Bruce T. Martin

Prototype of Sheila Kennedy's design for Interim Bridges Project, in a Boston parking lot.

Questioning a 'male' use of the land.

Gina Crandell, who teaches landscape architecture at Iowa State University, brought down the house with a slide show that identified water motifs as either male (for example, a geyser, which is "predictable") or female (a "mysterious" swamp). "Is a geyser superior to a swamp?" she asked, getting participants to consider wetlands not as murky swamps but as national treasures that are more valuable ecologically than Old Faithful.

In fact, some local commissions are already regulating the work of landscape architects even on private wetlands to protect these endangered areas and their native plants. One example of wetland landscaping shown at the lecture was a pond "planted" by Karen McCoy, a Williamstown, Mass., artist, with a grid of submerged arrowhead leaf plants whose delicate blossoms and spiky leaves cut a design across the surface

of the water. "The danger," Ms. Crandell said, "lies in overdesigning wetland areas and thereby converting them from natural to pictorial landscapes, like the geysers.

In conjunction with the symposium, photographs of the work of women who are landscape architects and designers are on display on four floors of exhibition space at Schlesinger Library on the Radcliffe Yard. Co-curated by two faculty members, Elizabeth Dean Hermann and Eleanor M. McPeck, the show reveals innovative ideas from the past as well as for the future.

Included among the historic exhibits is the 1923 plan for the garden community of Oakcroft in Ridge-wood, N.J., by Marjorie Sewell-Cautley, who Neil M. Walker, one of the symposium speakers, said was the first American woman landscape architect to enter city planning.

At a time when developers built houses in uniform rows, her design of a communal green with six houses separated by gardens of native plants and trees was considered revolutionary. It was the precursor in the East of what became known as the "garden cities movement," where plantings and houses are merged in the landscape.

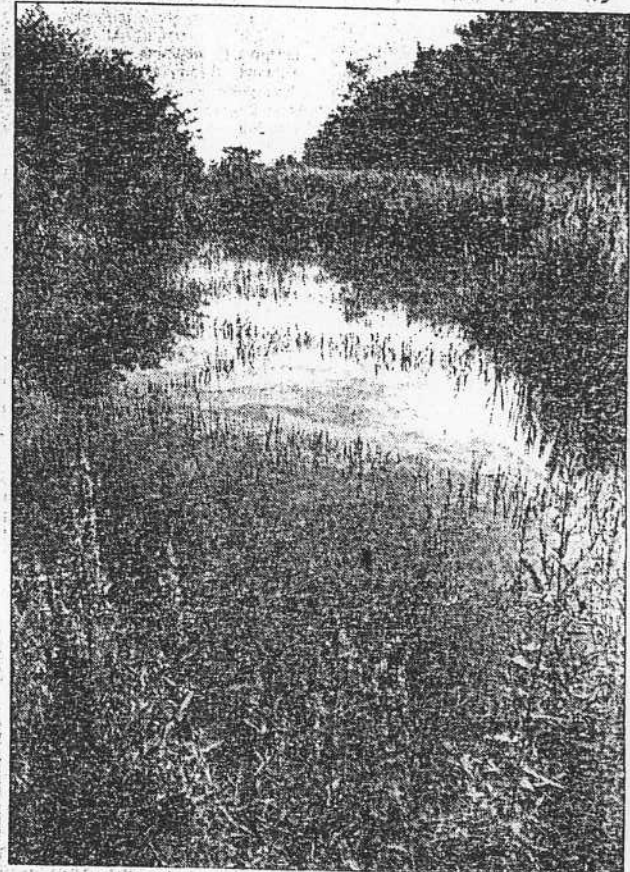
The show, whose focus is New England, displays several projects for the greening of the cities, especially Boston, where new open space will result from the submersion of Interstate 93, a major road. To make the 10-year construction period attractive to pe-



Polly Brown for The New York Times

Elizabeth Dean Hermann, left, and Eleanor M. McPeck, show curators.

destrians, Sheila Kennedy has designed elegant frame passageways for the Interim Bridges Project, which look in silhouette like New England covered bridges. (A prototype of this airy structure has already been built in a Boston parking lot.) As a



Courtney Frisco

Wetland landscaping: Karen McCoy's planted pond.

studio project, the Radcliffe students themselves have been working on a proposal for land that will be reclaimed with the submersion of I-93.

But the show isn't limited to the library. There is a touch of magic right across the common from Radcliffe. Steam and mist that emerge on city streets from underground ducts have inspired the designer Joan Brigham with an idea for a fountain on the Harvard campus. In the center of Peter Walker's Tanner Fountain, a concentric circle of boulders, she has produced clouds of mist that shroud passers-by like a deep coastal fog.

As another interpretation of what women seek in gardens, the graduate students presented a separate exhibition called "Strangers in Paradise," located in Cronkhite Graduate Center. Student members of the Radcliffe

Chapter of the Boston Society of Landscape Architects used their impressions of a 1990 Canadian women's film entitled "Strangers in Good Company" as the basis of their projects. In the cult hit, a group of elderly women are stranded at a house in the wilderness. As they learn to cope with the environment, they reveal their life stories. The students designed models of imaginary gardens and landscapes suitable to the characters in the film. Using mostly collage art, they created windows on private worlds — a call for landscapes with poetry as well as ecology.

"Women, Land, Design" will be on view at the Schlesinger Library until June 18. From May 7 to June 11, "Strangers in Paradise" will be on view at the Bank of Boston's main lobby gallery, 100 Federal Street, Boston.