

THE LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

1998/2018

The Language of Landscape

“Anne Whiston Spirn brings to her reading of landscapes the eye of an artist, the mind of a scholar, and the pen of a gifted writer. What she has produced is nothing less than a field guide for all those who share her belief that the language of landscape is among the vest and most meaningful that any of us can hope to understand. The result is a triumph. There are few books that have the power to change the way one sees the world. This is one of them.”

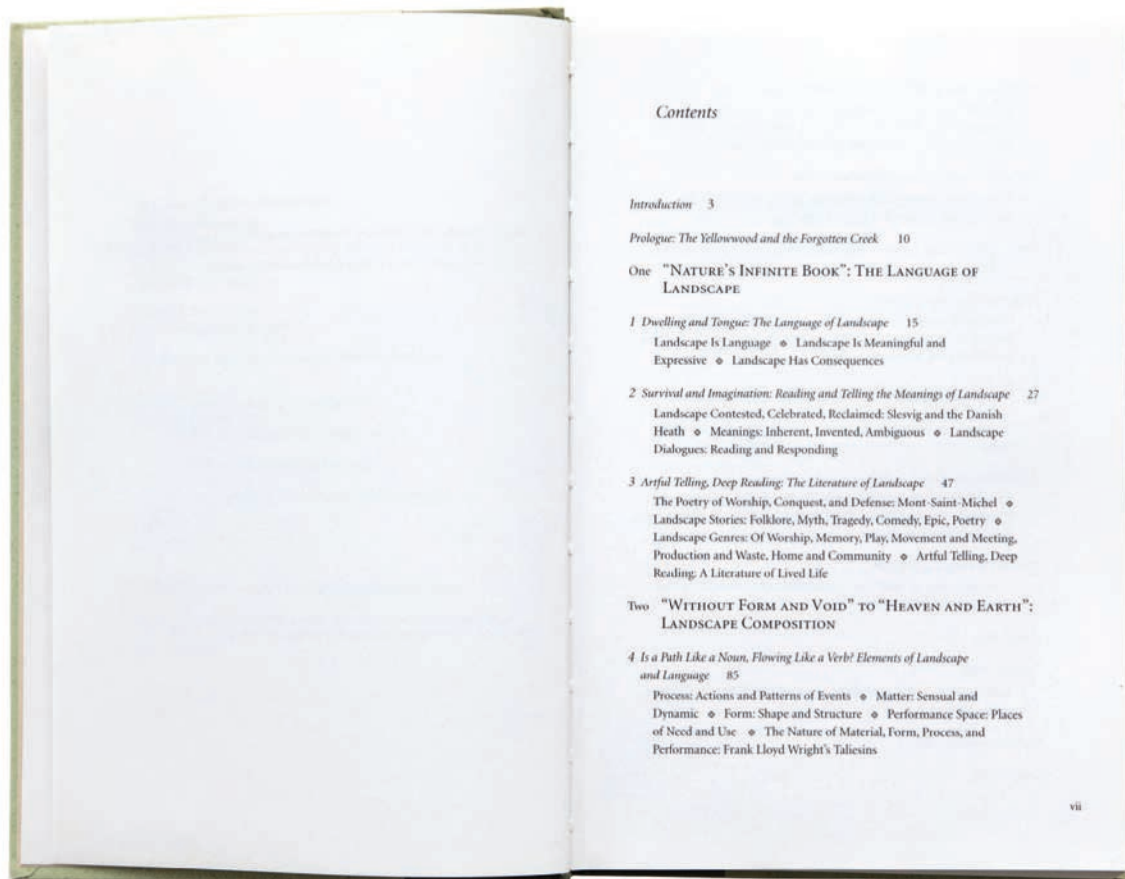
WILLIAM CRONON, author of *Nature's Metropolis*

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



Contents

Introduction 3

Prologue: The Yellowwood and the Forgotten Creek 10

One "NATURE'S INFINITE BOOK": THE LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE

1 *Dwelling and Tongue: The Language of Landscape* 15
 Landscape Is Language ♦ Landscape Is Meaningful and Expressive ♦ Landscape Has Consequences

2 *Survival and Imagination: Reading and Telling the Meanings of Landscape* 27
 Landscape Contested, Celebrated, Reclaimed: Slesvig and the Danish Heath ♦ Meanings: Inherent, Invented, Ambiguous ♦ Landscape Dialogues: Reading and Responding

3 *Artful Telling, Deep Reading: The Literature of Landscape* 47
 The Poetry of Worship, Conquest, and Defense: Mont-Saint-Michel ♦ Landscape Stories: Folklore, Myth, Tragedy, Comedy, Epic, Poetry ♦ Landscape Genres: Of Worship, Memory, Play, Movement and Meeting, Production and Waste, Home and Community ♦ Artful Telling, Deep Reading: A Literature of Lived Life

Two "WITHOUT FORM AND VOID" TO "HEAVEN AND EARTH": LANDSCAPE COMPOSITION

4 *Is a Path Like a Noun, Flowing Like a Verb? Elements of Landscape and Language* 85
 Process: Actions and Patterns of Events ♦ Matter: Sensual and Dynamic ♦ Form: Shape and Structure ♦ Performance Space: Places of Need and Use ♦ The Nature of Material, Form, Process, and Performance: Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesins

vii

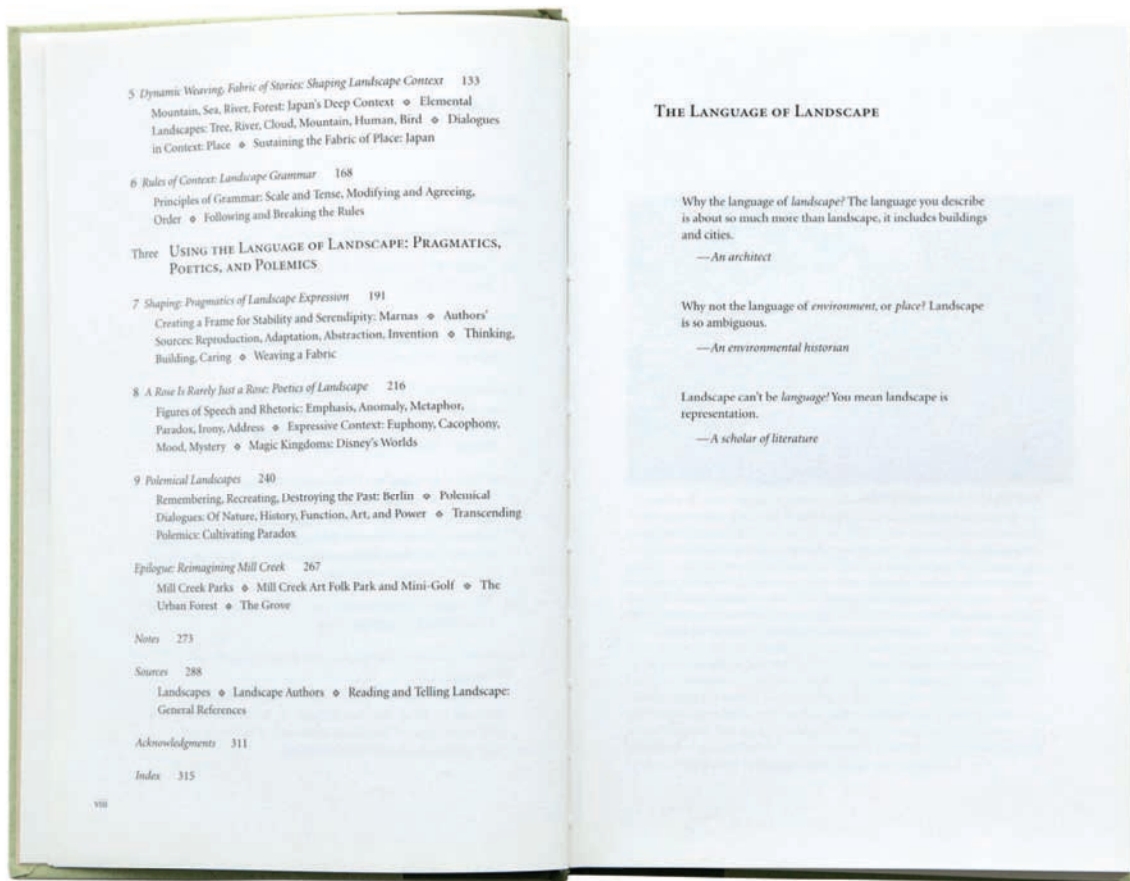
The Table of Contents is a map of the book: from landscape as language and literature, to landscape composition and expression.

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.

An electronic edition of *The Language of Landscape* (2018) features color photographs and new material.

SPONSORS

Bunting Institute, University of California Humanities Research Institute
 Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
 Yale University Press

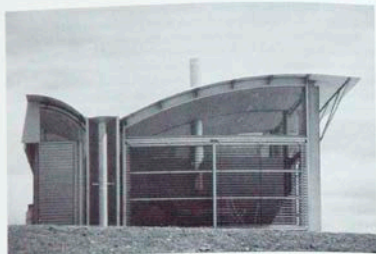


"*The Language of Landscape*, is a pathbreaking and ambitious attempt to set out a theory of landscape aesthetics that takes account of both human interpretive frameworks and natural processes."

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



Embodied knowledge: wind, rain, sun, shelter. Bingie, Australia. (Glenn Murcutt)

weren't noticing which makes you see something that isn't even visible."¹²

Murcutt studies his clients' patterns of living as closely as he studies the processes of sun shining, plants growing, water flowing, and wind blowing, and he designs rooms and rooms' arrangement to correspond to the patterns of clients' lives. When the artist Sydney Ball requested a place of meditation, Murcutt designed an elevated verandah enclosed on three sides, on a wooded slope, facing downslope, with a view of blue, distant mountains. The elevation and the sloping ground beneath living tree branches to eye level, an unusual perspective that lifts one out of the everyday to a transcendent view.

Murcutt works alone; because he is in great demand, clients must wait two to three years for a design of their home, office, or museum. But the period is not fallow; Murcutt meets with them, from time to time, to talk about their lives, habits, likes, dislikes, hopes, and dreams, and, in turn, shares with them his ideas of an ecologically responsible approach to design. He addresses the dimensions of production, construction, and maintenance and relates how materials, site layout, and the design itself conserve environmental resources. He and his clients come to consensus about basic aims, or, if not, he suggests another architect. The product of these dialogues, like the house for Ball and a vacation home for the Magney family at Bingie, along the Pacific coast in southeastern Australia, express the daily and seasonal rhythms of the place and the people who live, work, or come there. The Magneys camped out on the site in tents on weekends and holidays for years



Empathetic imagination: water, light, and life, aligned. Bingie, Australia. (Glenn Murcutt)

before they built the house. Murcutt designed a building like a spacious, sunny tent, with two bedrooms and a verandah facing the water, with windows, doors, and vents that can be opened or closed, and with kitchen, bathroom, and corridor along the back. The roofline echoes the silhouette of a gull in flight, wings spread; the gutter is in the middle of the inward-sloping roof, instead of at the edge, and two downspouts are columns at either end. The shape of the ceiling inside the house and the corridor along which people move reflect the path along which the water flows. Rain drums on the roof, streams into the gutter, swirls down the cylindrical downspouts, visible through glass doors at either end of the hall, and falls into an underground tank—the only water supply for the house. Water is linked to its source in rain and sky and to a reservoir in the ground, necessary dialogues made poetic, everyday experience made aesthetic. Elegant sparseness, a hallmark of Murcutt's work, expresses his environmental ethics.

Murcutt's skill in the language of landscape brings his clients in deliberate dialogue with processes that sustain their lives, and that are often taken for granted. People adjust windows and walls to admit, intensify, or block light and air flow, as one adjusts sails on a boat to catch or avoid the wind, and, in the process, they learn. For those who live in such houses, light changing, wind blowing, rain falling, and reservoir filling become visible, audible, and tangible. Imagine an entire neighborhood or town—buildings, streets, sewers, parks—as at Ball and Bingie, that engage residents in dialogues with natural processes.

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

"Spinn'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



Water flowing farm in floodplain. (Alex S. MacLean/Landslides)

when the rising sun shone directly through the pillars of the avenue leading to the inner circle of stones.⁶ Most landscapes are designed to be sensed through movement, at a particular tempo, for a specific duration, in a rhythm. The vast scale of seventeenth-century French gardens, like Versailles, Vaux-le-Vicomte, and Chantilly, was calculated to impress at a walking pace. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American parkways, like Boston's Riverway and New York's Bronx River Parkway, were meant to be seen at the speed of a horse-drawn carriage, then by automobile. "New vistas unfold because of elevated freeways," writes Lawrence Halprin. "Vast panoramic views are disclosed which were never seen before. The great vivid skylines of the city can be seen, all of a sudden, not as a static picture, but as a series of constantly changing impressions which move by like the frames in a motion picture."⁷ The landscape of the San Jose freeway was designed to be experienced at an even, high speed. The series of framed views of Rousham, an eighteenth-century English garden largely by William Kent, are seen from a path at a rhythm of long, leisurely movements in a single direction, punctuated by occasional stops. In Bomod, also in southwestern England, a garden of the same period by "Capability" Brown, with no single principal path, the rolling terrain, the rounded groves of trees with trunks silhouetted up to the height of browsing sheep, and the architectural monuments propel walkers through the landscape to the destinations. Bomod, cinematic, not photographic, is experienced through continuous movement, not static views.



Water flowing buildings and vacant land in floodplain, Dudley Street neighborhood, Boston. (Alex S. MacLean/Landslides)

Processes Connect: Making Sense of Events and Experience

When I first saw the Dudley Street neighborhood of Boston in November 1984, I was dismayed. I knew the statistics—twice the unemployment rate of Boston as a whole, 30 percent of the land abandoned—but they simply did not prepare me for the place itself: entire square blocks of vacant land, some heaped with big chunks of concrete, piles of tires, and trash; playgrounds with broken equipment, cracked pavement, and smashed glass; wooden houses with peeling paint, sagging porches, roofs with holes, both triple-decker apartments and large, single-family homes with fine architectural details. The waste was overwhelming. With me that day was Hans Klemmich, a German friend; he said he had not seen such destruction since Germany after the war; how could Americans permit such conditions in peacetime? Our guide, Charlotte Kahn, director of Boston Urban Gardeners, pointed to what was neither waste nor destruction, the many community gardens, not as visible in late fall as they would have been in summer, and also houses under repair, 40 percent of them owned by those who lived in them.

As I lay awake that night, sure I had missed something, I replayed what I had seen. The fifteen hundred vacant lots were not scattered evenly, but concentrated. Few were on hillsides and hilltops; houses there were substantial, most in good condition, some had sweeping views over the city. I got out of bed and pulled out the U.S. Geological Survey maps of Boston. With colored pencils of light to dark

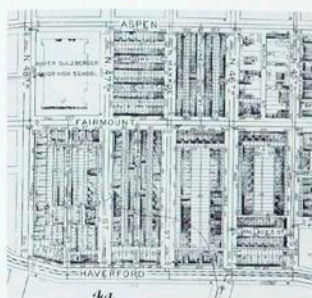


Gaumnar ignored burying Mill Creek (others). (Philadelphia Water Department)

there, along the line of the sewer stream. A playground was built by the city on the site where, in 1960, several blocks of housing had collapsed and been demolished. Now, sagging streets and sidewalks and cracked walls reveal ongoing shifting and foretell future cave-ins. For many years, the creek has ripped open the grid, undermined buildings and streets, slashed meandering diagonals of shifting foundations, tumbled buildings, and vacant land across the urban landscape. Young woodlands of alanthus, sumac, and ash have grown up on older lots, urban meadows on lots recently vacated.

Most community gardens in this part of West Philadelphia lie within the old floodplain of Mill Creek. Gardeners at Aspen Farms know there is a buried stream in their neighborhood; they see its effects in and around their garden. Houses across from the garden have sunk several feet, and the plots in the back corner, where the garden slopes toward the old streambed, need water less frequently, since the soil there is often moist. The Spruce Hill Garden was built where a house collapsed over a tributary to the Mill Creek. A crack now spans the entire height of a house across the street from the garden; the building has sunk down over that same old streambed, just one block away, and Street, a low point, floods every time it rains.

After a heavy rain, the Schuylkill flows milky brown, the water surface glazed, oily, and lumpy, like a thick soup of sediment and sewage. Normally, rain falls,



Gaumnar ignored houses built over sewers. (G. W. Bromley, 1927)



Consequences of ignorance: vacant lots in Mill Creek. (West Philadelphia Landscape Project)



Deep context: sky, wind, open, dry. High Plains, Colorado.

Great Plains. Denver, a city of trees, is an oasis of irrigated green within the arid landscape, a refuge from this wide open land. It is buffered from the extremes of mountains and Plains by the presence of both: from mountains' steep, rocky ravines by Plain's soft slopes; from Plain's drought by snowpack and mountain streams. To James Michener the South Platte River that flows through Denver is "a sad, bewildered nothing of a river. . . . It's a sand bottom, a wandering afterthought, a useless irritation, a frustration, and when you've said all that, it suddenly rises up, spreads out to a mile wide, engulfs your crops and lays waste your farms."²⁷ A wide river of shuflo, braided channels, it is clogged with sediment carried down from the mountains. It flows through willow thickets and cottonwood stands across the high dry plains to the Missouri and on down to the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico. Long dry periods are punctuated by cloudbursts that swell streams and rivers and, especially when augmented by springtime snow melt from the mountains, swiftly convert dry creek and river beds to wide, raging torrents. These rhythms are part of the deep context of this place; they become part of each life that dwells here.

Rhythms of high peak flows separated by long periods of extremely low flow are a challenge for the designers of storm sewer systems. Denver's sewers were once open gulches; many were converted to underground pipes, but the enormous size required to accommodate peak storm flow made conversion often im-

154

Landscape Composition



Response to deep context: house in grove. High Plains, Colorado.

practical. Over the past twenty-five years, therefore, Denver has built a new storm drainage system of parks and parkways. The channels through which the stormwater flows are the paths through which people walk, ride, or kayak, the form congruent with the deep context of the region. The channels and the water flowing make this context and its rhythms legible within the city even as they link outlying farmland, suburbs, and downtown. It is a storm sewer/open space system that is not only functional and sustainable, but also beautiful and meaningful. Skyline Plaza, part of a downtown redevelopment project, steps down into a sunken garden that pools water after heavy rains; it prevents flooding downstream by letting the water seep gradually into the sewer. Harvard Gulch, a storm drainage channel and linear park, has replaced the narrow, dirt gulch that once flooded adjacent houses. The original plan called for an underground storm sewer; instead, the water now flows through a park whose sinuous landforms echo the movement of water, even when it is only a small trickle. Where the level of the channel drops, a weir breaks the water's erosive force. At high water the weir is exciting, but even at low flow, its sculptural form recalls the power of water at high flow. Where the South Platte River moves through downtown, at the confluence with Cherry Creek, there is a park and a plaza where people come to watch the kayak races and sit by the river. The plaza has another purpose, designed to absorb and deflect floodwaters, its broad terraces alternately submerged or exposed. At

Shaping Landscape Context

155

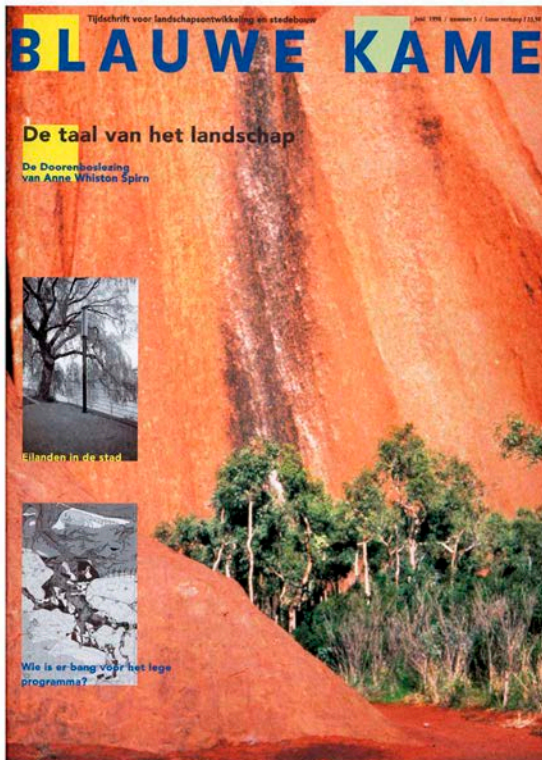
Photography was an important mode of research, a way to explore ideas about design adaptation to a landscape's deep structure (above) and to reflect on the interplay between Euclidean and fractal geometry in the poetics of landscape expression (right).

"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



Metafieren in het landschap bepalen mede hoe mensen denken en doen. *George Lakoff en Mark Johnson* laten in hun boek 'Metaphors we live by' zien wat Emerson waarnaar mensen hebben en ervaren iets in termen van iets anders. Zij presenteren fabelen en goed in de omringende wereld. Binnen en welken worden gezien als menselijke, een rivier als iets wat niet een mens, een berg als iets met een voet, een vuur, een auto, een achterkant en een zijkant. Men zou niet getuigd kunnen zien als continue en ongedifferentieerd. *De afname* verduidelijkt en spant voor het bepalen door het individueel bewaarden dat door de inherente kwaliteiten van het landschap.

veel metaforen in betrekken op elementaire relaties met het landschap: bewegen, maken, eten, verspillen. De meest alledaagse metaforen verwijzen naar ruimte en richting: naar binnen en naar buiten. In de Amerikaanse cultuur zijn 'hoog' en 'binnen' goed terwijl 'onder' en 'buiten' slecht zijn. 'Centraal' is belangrijk en 'marginaal' is dat

In Maj i Washington DC, med haar lange strakke watergaten en gaasen vertoon van breidel, is langer en oepender die het beschemen en afstemmen moedlik makke. Het kost veel meer tijd dan verwacht om er dooreen te lopen. By het Inland Memorial wou men zich kleen by de vele reders, het herennieuwende gelyc beeld en het hooft roesvol.

In Disneyland magste het koninkryk worden met oeverloep en miniatuurmen, wettende en in humoristiek effenier breidel. Aan 's gebouwen, lantarnen, alle hooft op kleen, met normaal, soetel meenich al gelyc roesvol. In Mickey Mouse Birthdayland is die amsigste elementen omte inspeunen en beelddien, die de hooft van de hooft, soetel meenich al gelyc roesvol. In Mickey Mouse Birthdayland is die amsigste elementen omte inspeunen en beelddien, die de hooft van de hooft, soetel meenich al gelyc roesvol.

[illegible]

Metalen liggen aan de basis van de poëzie en omzatten een overdracht naar betekenis van het ene naar het andere, een 'verbodde, vaak onverschuld, verplaatsing tussen twee niet oorspronkelijk te sluiten'. Wanneer een leemslag van een sloot bij dat ding hoort is het een metonymie. Als kind dacht ik dat het Iliaven Godelijn een rijk metaal was, mer met een lange schakel, schakel was dat deurs door het Europese landschap was gespannen. 'Voet' reist mensen in New Jersey is het ook. Een 'voel' greep in Arfgen was het herkol voor het dorp. Druenslands sprookjesreik staat voor 'Tantland'. Man heeft dorp de daken aan

[illegible]



The Language Of Landscape

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

BY PAUL BENNETT

Melissa Cooperman is a film student at New York University. By necessity—renting indoor space is expensive—most of her films take place in the streets and parks of the city. In one, a

young man smartly dressed in a black suit walks through Bryant Park in Midtown. The camera is held low as he walks by, at knee level, so that we see the park in the background, most distinctly evident by the throng of black fold-up chairs which have become icons for this landscape. The man finds a chair and sits down. He takes from his briefcase a tablecloth, a wine glass and a bottle, and a paper figure, which he affixes to the tablecloth on his lap with some tape. He then proceeds to toast his imaginary friend, while lunch hour in this famously popular park occurs around him.

The appearance of Bryant Park in

Cooperman's film helps anchor the viewer, especially if that viewer is a landscape architect. The familiarity of the landscape gives the piece context; it is about a specific spot, a specific event, in a specific place. But for Cooperman, Bryant Park is more than background material—it actually generated the story. "I was 'temping' this summer in Midtown and I used to go to Bryant Park for lunch," she explains. "There is really a whole lunch-hour culture there. I always loved the chairs and the texture of the pebbles; it seems very Parisian. So I just sat and watched people having lunch, took in the place, and the story came to me."

"For all these people, lunch is the one hour you're allowed to be a person, instead of an office automaton. I remember when I was there once at lunchtime and there was this guy in a suit and tie standing there practicing his golf swing. But there were no balls or clubs."



RECOGNIZABLE LANDSCAPES, such as Bryant Park, far above, and Shore Road Park, below, a popular kite-flying spot near the Veterans Bridge, generate stories that are captured in the work of film student Melissa Cooperman. In Los Angeles, photographer Camille Jose Vergara discovered a surprising story of reinvention and heritage in the landscapes of Mexican immigrants, above.

The *Language of Landscape* was the subject of an entire issue of the design magazine, *Blauwe Kamer* (Dutch), of a long interview in the Japan journal, *Science*, and a feature story in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, as well as many other reviews and radio programs.

"This remarkable book urges readers to understand the common language of landscape which speaks to all our senses every day."

LAWRENCE HALPRIN, Landscape Architect

"[*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

SLASHES

[illegible]

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

79

Poet Adrienne Rich incorporated a quotation from *The Language of Landscape* into “Slashes,” in *The School Among the Ruins, Poems 2000–2004* (Norton, 2004).

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.”

