The Garden City

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"The Garden City"

by

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Part I

"The Garden City" as Public Art

The proposal presented here entails the rather large-scale imposition of a network of markers or monuments throughout the landscape of Western Montana. While these markers do make allusions to history, environmental ideals, and formal esthetic qualities, their principal role is as a comprehensive and comprehensible representation of the presently existing and functioning landscape.

The above paragraph is an excerpt from the accompanying pamphlet "The Garden City: Landscape Art in Western Montana," and gives the reader an indication of some principal concerns described in the pamphlet's design proposal. As this pamphlet is intended to function as a concise, generally informative, and publicly available account of the proposed design, I will rely upon it to provide primary descriptions and explanations, and will attempt here only to elaborate some areas I feel are of particular importance.

"The Garden City" proposal first, as might be inferred from the selected paragraph, is an attempt to identify, represent, and commemorate the landscape of Western Montana. Secondly it is an attempt to do so in a manner comprehensible, meaningful, and accessible to the people who are themselves a part of that landscape. The final physical means through which this is to be accomplished may be relatively simple although ultimate success depends upon the proposal's ability to communicate an understanding of the landscape's inherent meanings.
The landscape -- and particularly the wild, natural Rocky Mountain landscape of Western Montana -- must be regarded as one of the region's most vital resources. Through the various industries of Recreation and Tourism, Timber, Forest Management, Mining, etc., it has stimulated widespread activity and growth for the area both economically and culturally. More important still is the role of this natural landscape in providing a common identity or popular image for the region; since proximity to the unspoiled out-of-doors distinguishes the daily lives of those in Western Montana just as it supplies, more than any other feature, an attraction for those outside. For this landscape's influence upon day-to-day living and the popular culture of the area to become apparent, one need only consider the nearly phenomenal enthusiasm with which recreational activities are typically met, or the profusion of artistic landscape representations (visual, literary) that are available. By "popular culture" I am referring very generally to that wide collection of activities and artifacts (artistic, recreational, commercial, etc.) which distinguish a given geographical area through widespread participation and enjoyment of a majority (or at least a highly visible section) of the population. The opportunity for outdoor recreational activity, the availability of landscape painting, and various other allusions to Nature, are certainly highly visible phenomena in Western Montana. It is not, however, my purpose in this paper to enumerate the variety of forms these cultural activities may take, their ultimate effect upon the population, nor their consequences in economic terms. I think it must be granted none-the-less that these activities, and subsequently the wild landscape which facilitates
them, are distinctive and highly significant parts of the overall
culture and identity of Western Montana -- ones which the Western Montanan
confronts every day either directly or indirectly, and ones which are
accordingly deserving of some attention. The significance of the wild
landscape, or what I've referred to in the accompanying pamphlet as the
natural "garden", cannot be over-emphasized and any attempt to
represent it must be considered in this light.

It is in recognition of this pervasive influence that the "Garden
City" proposal takes as its foremost objective the comprehensive re­
presentation and commemoration of Western Montana landscape. If this
representation is to be truly comprehensive, however, it must address
still another influence of comparable importance -- that of the centralized
urban community.

While I think it can accurately be assumed that Western Montana looks
outward toward Nature for a sort of popular identity, it must also turn
inward, toward a concentrated center, for its more material and practical
needs. This center, I've suggested, is the city of Missoula, since Missoula
functions to varying degrees as a hub of commerce, industry, finance,
government, education, entertainment, social interaction, etc. It exists
principally as a centralized distributor for the goods, services and
conveniences upon which the Western Montana population is dependent. There
exists, then, in Western Montana, a situation which every day involves
the resident with a complete range of landscapes -- from a natural and
untouched periphery to an imposed and constructed center -- and it is
this relationship with landscape which (though not exclusive to Western
Montana) most distinguishes life in the area.
Given this complete spectrum of landscape the problem then arises of how to represent the total landscape with a consistency throughout. How can the landscape of Western Montana be commemorated with equal attention to the wilderness and to the important, if less dramatic scenes of our everyday comings and goings?

Toward this end I have, in the "Garden City" proposal, identified five concentric subdivisions or zones of land use (five areas which can easily be perceived as fulfilling different functions and therefore having different relationships to the center and the periphery) and I have undertaken to represent the particular significances of each in as comprehensible a manner as possible. This establishes then, a kind of idealized super-structure within the existing geographical bounds of Western Montana based exclusively on the very generalized functioning of landscape, and the way in which each such subdivision is perceived in relation to central and peripheral extremes.

So that these proposed zones might be defined and delineated, I've proposed the construction of a concentric network of geographical markers (or public monuments) to be positioned equally throughout each identified landscape. I hope in so doing that all landscapes will be addressed, and that individual monuments will be able to commemorate them as well as become integrated and working parts of them. Successful integration and function, however, requires that these monuments remain as informative and comprehensible as possible, even at the compromise of more private and inevitably alienating qualities of contemporary design. Major concerns
of this proposal involve the public identification and commemoration of a commonly shared resource and so popular communication must assume a priority over formal esthetics.

By now it should be apparent that the conception of landscape which this project proposes to represent is not one concerned strictly with formal juxtapositions of trees, mountains, and streams, nor necessarily of utility poles, buildings, and streets. It does not so much involve the spatial relationships of mass and void or the interactions of selected colors, as it does involve the functional and perceptual relationships of public spaces and the interactions of people within them. In this interest I've presented, in the "Garden City" pamphlet a skeletal framework consisting of: 1) the already mentioned concentric network, 2) the incorporation of distance and locational information, and 3) the use of an obeliskian form with dominant "ornamentation" being of a figurative and representational character. Within this general framework the more specific details of design may be instituted and manipulated to comply with the demands of specific place and public interest. I will explain further.

1. The concentric network (five rings of twelve monuments each) first of all, identifies and delineates the successive rings of landscape, thereby imposing a new theoretical structure or order upon the more utilitarian one that already exists (street patterns, utility lines, commercial zones, residential districts, farmers' fields, etc.)

2. A sense of the viewer's whereabouts in relation to this new structure is provided through additional information incorporated in
each monument: a) distance indications (in miles and feet) to both the center and the periphery, and b) a chart of the network with a 'You are Here' locator. Such elements will provide the viewer. I think, with enough information that he or she would be able to ascertain his or her geographic position in terms of both this new imposed order and the former practical order (as well as Western Montana in general).

Perhaps the most important, if most obvious, aspect of this proposed network of monuments lies in the fact that they are constructed in essentially public places and are accessible by the community. Since they are to be public in their character, it seems only appropriate that they address and allow for a successful interpretation by the public audience.

3. To facilitate this successful interpretation, I've chosen the obelisk as the predominant form for the individual monuments. The obelisk is a traditional form common to many structures of civic significance. It can be found most often on lawns of courthouses and other governmental buildings (often in conjunction with a bronze likeness of some local hero) or on other public and semi-public lands (parks, cemeteries, etc.). The use of such a form in this proposal may optimally make an initial association with commemorative structures of traditional civic importance and may also minimize the alienation that might result from use of a less conventional form. Also towards a social and commemorative association, each structure is to contain an image (photographically-derived to minimize personalized formal artistic input) of a human figure -- a man or a woman
of some representational value to the specific landscape being addressed. In this, then, the structures make an attempt to become monuments to the Western Montana landscape in the conception I've already described -- that is, to the functional, social, and cultural interactions of a given place. Likewise the perceived function of the place is reflected in the construction materials employed. For example, physical recreation is implied in the natural wilderness landscape by use of lightweight nylon and aluminum common in outdoor sporting equipment. Certain of the suburban monuments incorporate materials and techniques typical of advertising and commercial signage alluding to what the architect Robert Venturi calls a "commercial vernacular." This use of typically local materials also facilitates a formal compatibility with surrounding spaces and structures thereby further minimizing any initial alienation from the public.

The cooperation, support, and eventual participation of the community is essential to the success of any public work. In this interest I propose that all specific design decisions beyond the skeletal frame I've just presented be made in cooperation and collaboration with any agencies or individual members of the community that might wish to take an interest in the plan. Only in this manner, I feel, can there be achieved the most meaningful and popular image possible.
Part II

Public Art as Communications Artifact

Toward a Functioning Art in a Functional Society

In order to provide a theoretical basis for some of the concerns introduced in the preceding section, allow me now to present a very generalized view of the built environment -- one in which Public Art and what I'll call "Public Utility" are perceived to be opposing extremes or poles in a continuum of all public and publicly oriented building and construction. This is of course a highly simplified view -- including nearly everything and distinguishing practically nothing -- but it is one that I think can none-the-less be of some assistance toward both a criticism of presently existing art in the public, and to a discussion of some potentially changing roles for public art in the future.

Under the heading "Public Art" first of all, is incorporated all those works which, installed in essentially public (most often urban) locations, are presented primarily as art, and are popularly perceived to function in no practical capacity beyond, perhaps, a visual enhancement of the immediate surroundings. Included here might be NEA "Art in Public Places" proposals, 1% construction cost allocations to art, private and corporate funded works, etc.

"Public Utility", on the other hand, refers to all those constructions and contrivances of the public landscape which are perceived for the greater part strictly in terms of their functions. Examples from this category might include buildings, streets, highways, advertising signs,
telephone wires, etc. -- almost any artifact of the public landscape which is designed principally to serve some designated purpose, or to produce some specified end product.

Mediating these two extremes I propose are public monuments or any of the civic memorials which we encounter every day in our comings and goings throughout the public landscape. These are works (sculpted war heros or politicians, commemoration plaques, historic markers, etc.) which are generally perceived to be somehow related to the public artwork, yet serve a specified function in tributing and commemorating the people and events of the past. A complete understanding of why I have, in this theoretical view, delegated so central and pivotal a position to such works requires a more in-depth review of all three categories. To simplify this task I have selected specific examples to act as representatives for their respective categories. For instance, "Public Monumentality" is represented here by Eero Saarinen's Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (or St. Louis Gateway Arch) -- a monument standing at somewhat of a geographical (and historical) midpoint in our nation and saluting the American westward movement. In the category of Public Art I've selected a recently completed (1980) work by the sculptor Richard Serra -- "The St. John's Rotary Arc" The "Arc" is a low sweeping curve of steel (12' x 200' x 2½") standing in the midst of the open space created by a traffic rotary at the exit of Manhattan's Holland Tunnel. It is presented exclusively as a work of art and pretends to no practical or functional rationale whatsoever. The category "Public Utility" could
well be represented by the traffic rotary itself, or for that matter, by the Holland Tunnel. For the purposes of this paper, however, I have chosen another, somewhat similar artifact -- the freeway interchange. The interchange (any one of the cloverleaf-type access facilities of our American expressway system) is a technological development designed exclusively for the service of automobile transportation, to perform a specified function (on/off access), and to do so in the most efficient manner possible. Through the use of these three examples (from Art, Monument, and Utility) I hope we might be able to re-examine some of the relationships -- both existing and potential ones -- which public art maintains with the rest of the public environment.

Very briefly, ours is a technologically-oriented society and one in which much of the way in which an object or activity is perceived is dependent upon that object or activity's function. The sociologist Cornelis Ven Peursen, quoted in Patrick Nuttgens' book The Landscape of Ideas, states, "Things do not exist in themselves; they are no longer substances, but they exist in and for the sake of what they do with us and what we do with them", and then again, "in the period of functional thinking, (the main issue) is 'how' something is, how it functions". The freeway interchange, in our example, exists primarily for our service and to facilitate a specific and designated function. It is understood in terms of this function and it is evaluated almost solely in terms of the degree to which it satisfies the cultural ideals of
efficiency and economy. It is, then, a suitable representative of our more practical, routine, and utilitarian contemporary society, and is certainly an integrated feature of our public landscape.

In contrast, "St. John's Rotary Arc", as I've mentioned, maintains little or no association with (or even allusion to) practical function, and more pertinent still, makes little attempt to become an integrated feature of any domain other than that purely of art. Although the "Arc" may be in its conception "site-specific", (that is, designed to relate to, and integrate itself within a specific location) its principal concerns must be regarded as artistic. (Serra himself, in a recent interview, has said, "I am interested in following the sculptural language I've developed in building works."^) There is nothing objectionable nor even unusual in this. Art has always existed as a sort of non-verbal form of communication in any society. If, however, the so-called "sculptural language" in a public artwork has evolved to such a point that is is no longer translatable by the artistically uneducated public, that is, if the internal meanings which the artist intended to communicate in the artwork are no longer understood by the public, the artwork is no longer functioning for the public, and no longer truly integrated in the public landscape, but instead somehow separated.

I should mention before continuing any further that it has recently been concluded that the public artwork (whether translatable or not) can be rationalized in terms of an economic function -- a function which does ultimately benefit the community, and integrate the artwork in the economics of the community. Kate Linker, in a recent article appearing
in Artforum magazine, has shown that art in the public can be a good public investment (and therefore become functional economically) for the following reasons:

1) it can become a symbol of progressive values -- a sort of public relations value,

2) through construction costs, money spent on art can recirculate throughout the community,

3) the artwork can be a benefit to tourism and urban redevelopment. (If the work generates enough interest, or improves the esthetic living/working conditions of a downtown area for example, it will draw more people to that area and subsequently revitalize economic and employment conditions.)

These are, of course, very important and worthy functions, and ones that will undoubtedly be of help in the future funding of public artworks. I feel it important to point out, however, that these are all functions which are, in a sense, external of the work itself. For success they depend upon an external assimilation process whereby a community (often an initially hostile one) gradually accepts and ultimately establishes a kind of identification with a public artwork. The work of art, in this instance, is then appreciated as a sort of landmark or as a symbol of community or neighborhood identity, (and perhaps even for its functions an economic stimulus). These are certainly positive (if secondary) functions and ones which should not be discounted. Still it is rare, however, that the artwork is appreciated in terms of its own communi-
communications function, that is, in terms of its own internal meaning.

This perceived separation from direct function contributes to art's privileged status -- one which allows it to exist for its own sake without obligation to the larger society, and one which is integrally linked to the notion of autonomy in art. When, however, included in such a separation is the function of art to communicate its meaning -- that is, when the artwork becomes comprehensible to only the relative few who are knowledgeable in the evolution of art in this century -- then the commonly held perception of public art as being relegated to an "add-on status" of decorative enhancement (and the formerly public place being seen as an extension of the museum space) is not at all unjustified. The artwork is no longer an integrated component of the functioning public landscape, but rather a non-functioning and alien imposition.

If on the other hand, it were possible to find in the work of art a degree of its perceived separation or autonomy, while it simultaneously exercises its potential ability to function (communicate) on a community-wide scale, then it might regain an integrated role in the working of society. This perhaps is a set of requirements which may at first seem a bit ideal and probably unattainable. It is one, however, that I hope to show does in fact exist in the public monument, and might therefore be applied as well to contemporary artwork.
I have presented so far the almost total utility and concomitant integration of the typical freeway interchange, as well as the marked lack of function, and autonomy, with which "St. John's Rotary Arc" is perceived. I would now like to propose that both these qualities are evident in a single work of American monumentality -- the St. Louis Gateway Arch. I use the Arch not so much because I feel it is a typical representative of the public monument, but because the two roles that the typical monument can perform -- that of art and communications function -- are in the St. Louis Arch, distinctly separated and therefore easy to describe.

Eero Saarinen's soaring stainless steel arch is immediately readable as a large-scale sculptural installation on the banks of the Mississippi River at the city of St. Louis. It is an object of formal beauty (Art) in its 590' height and delicately tapering and arching curves, and is certainly seen to enhance the reserved park-like space in which it is situated if not the city of St. Louis as a whole.

For the more receptive viewer, the arch may serve in another capacity -- as a gateway and symbol of passage, change, and movement. For most, however, this greater significance only becomes apparent through a tour of the underground museum that is adjacent to, and which complements the monument. Here the viewer becomes informed with the
historical event of America's westward movement, and the larger meaning of the outside monument becomes evident.

Saarinen's Arch then, like Serra's Arc, can be a form of public sculpture. By itself it is separated from the practical and the routine. In combination with its museum, however, it acquires and performs (like the freeway interchange) a productive and public function. In a somewhat obvious and conventional display, the composite monument communicates, informs, and commemorates an historical event of our common heritage, and so becomes a functional artifact of communication. The monument succeeds at both artistic autonomy and utilitarian integration.

Confronted with contemporary art's apparent desire to broaden its audience and become more publicly accessible (evident by the increase throughout the last two decades of both publicly and privately funded projects for art in the public), we must also presume a desire (if not responsibility) on the part of the artist to make his/her work of some use to, and integrated with that extended audience. Utility and re-integration can be achieved, I must believe, through an increase in public comprehension (as opposed to initial alienation and gradual assimilation) If art is to be re-integrated in a functional society it must function, and its first function is as an artifact of communications. Just as the public monument maintains its autonomy yet still manages to commemorate the people, places, and events of past significance, so too the public artwork can in its autonomy function to communicate the significance of contemporary society.
"The Garden City" as Communications Artifact

I cannot attempt here to offer specific and definitive solutions to the problem of how public art is to function socially and thereby become re-integrated in the public landscape. I believe the ways in which future artists undertake to solve such problems will be a strong measure of their creativity. I can, however, review some related issues, problems, and subsequent responses contained in my own work -- "The Garden City".

If an artwork is to function on a popular level, that is, if it is to communicate with a larger public audience, it might only benefit from addressing a subject of popular significance. In the "Garden City" I've sought to establish a commonly accepted and distinguishing aspect of local culture as subject for the project. For Western Montana this accepted and distinguishing cultural commonality can only be the local love of, and commitment to landscape in general (and the wilderness landscape more specifically).

Landscape (or at least the specifics of place) is a subject with which many artists have recently become involved in their desire to appeal to a public audience. The "presence of space" is one of few commonly "shareable" subjects still available to them (this in the absence of any universal iconography or even a shared belief system -- religion, political doctrine, etc. -- that might have existed in the
past). A sense of place in all its formal, functional, and sociological implications is a thing we all necessarily share, and a thing we cannot avoid becoming involved with in ordinary day-to-day living.

The artist has the potential opportunity to illuminate, accentuate and represent this common and shared phenomenon. Popular and idealized landscape representations, so pervasive throughout Western Montana, are evidence of local artists accentuating what is perhaps the area's most unifying and distinguishing feature -- the wilderness landscape -- and so may in a sense be considered devices with which to communicate the shared phenomenon of place.

Beyond this sort of idealized representation of only the most dramatic, and perhaps romantic, of landscapes, however, I have, in the "Garden City", tried to identify a sense of place as it occurs (and is perceived) in all the variations of contemporary and existing landscape (urban-wilderness). I have tried to do so further, not simply by means of literal representation, but rather through a reference to the common local technological manifestations and functions occurring in each, since I believe it is through such technology and function that the landscape is commonly perceived. Therein lies the subject of "the Garden City" and its proposed content.

The communications function of the artwork (the transmission of its meaning) is often thought to be dependent entirely upon its content. This is indeed true to some extent, and as I have tried to show, "The
"Garden City" does depend for popular communication upon a popular content. The manner in which this content is presented (or what we might call the "form" of the artwork) however, has a great deal to do with the work's potential for being popularly understood or comprehended as well. In our example of the St. Louis Arch, for instance, the form must be considered to be a composite of both sculptural beauty (arch) and graphic information (museum). Through a collaboration of these two individual components, the monument's intended content (the American westward expansion) is communicated to a broad, popular audience, all the while maintaining a degree of art's privileged status. In the St. Louis Arch these two components (art and information) work together toward a successful final communication, yet remain physically separated. I have in "The Garden City" proposed to combine these two components in a single monumental element.

The information to be communicated, as I have explained is the landscape of Western Montana. Popular communication of this information is achieved by providing the viewer with references to the physical and geographical make-up of the landscape (locational indications, and the use of construction materials reflective of local function), as well as a smaller reference to the social landscape (visual representations of both contemporary and historical figures of a significance to that landscape).

The second aspect of the composite -- that is, the artistic or autonomous and privileged part -- must become apparent through the
way in which this information is presented physically. Care must necessarily be taken to present what might be considered the ordinary information of Western Montana's everyday landscape in a somewhat extraordinary (though not alienating) fashion. Specifics of presentation will be dictated to a large degree by individual locations since compatibility with site is a major priority. Even within such constraints, however, and primarily through the incorporation of the obeliskian form, the perceived autonomy and privilege of art can be retained in these public monuments. In this combination I believe "The Garden City" can become both a successful public artwork, and a functioning artifact of communications.
NOTES


2. The term "communications artifact" is taken from an essay by Thomas V. Czarnowski, "The Street as Communications Artifact", On Streets, ed. Stanford Anderson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), pp. 207-211 in which he analyzes the various communications functions that the street assumes.

3. This is a notion developed by the geographer J.B. Jackson in his essay "The Public Landscape", Landscapes: Selected Writings of J.B. Jackson, ed. Erwin H. Zube (U. of Mass. Press, 1970) pp. 153-160 in which he presents the monuments as a basic and integrated component of the "megastructure" of the landscape. Other components include boundaries, highways, and public meeting places. Together they comprise for Jackson a kind of framework within which social and physical building and activity take place.


7. For Herbert Marcuse in his book The Aesthetic Dimension (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), p. 53. It is only through this privileged status -- this autonomy or "aesthetic dimension" -- that the artwork can function ("indict") in society. "The work of art can attain political relevance only as autonomous work. The aesthetic form is essential to its social function". Marcuse also condemns what he calls the "renunciation of aesthetic form", or what we might interpret as the minization of visual information in the artwork, as being self-defeating since it shuns that side of the artwork wherein communication can take place.


9. Ibid. p. 64. In her article Linker outlines the increase in the amount of art in the public. Regarding this new role for contemporary art she says "It enters into relations with an audience that is broad and heterogeneous. And it enters an environment that removes art from its slowly-developed, privileged status to an ancillary one, involving new roles within a wider realm of entertainment, politics and economics. All are consequences of sculpture's desire to be useful to, or usable by a newly extended audience".

10. Ibid. p.


