

Garden Environment - a Caged Space

"The most awful thing I've ever seen," was Frank Boyden's reaction to the site of the commission he had just won. Frank was to develop a garden environment for Eola Hall, the Forensic Psychiatric Treatment building in Salem, Oregon. Cigarette butts and bald areas of earth competed with depressed grass and dandelions. Building walls on two sides and chain link fence topped with razor wire on the remaining sides surrounded the 30 by 70 foot space.

Oregon's Art in Public Places program issued the challenge of developing this grim space into an environment which would "offer a change of place . . . create an atmosphere of peace and tranquility and a sense of hope" (from the RFP) for the 254 patients housed there. The environment is the exterior component of a Visitors' Center which will include, when completed, an interior space with comfortable seating, the total making a secure setting with access to the outdoors where patients and family can visit off-ward.

Oregon's Art in Public Places program, which began in 1975, has a long history of sensitivity to the sites which have been selected for the placement of artwork. (The law states that any new or remodeled state buildings with a construction budget of \$100,000 or more will dedicate 1% of the figure to buy art for the building.) But this site, with its sense of incarceration and the unusual needs of the patient population, presented a challenge in the most invigorating sense of that word. In addition to the physical "givens" of the space, no objects could be placed in the redesigned environment which could be used by patients to hurt themselves or others or which could provide a means of escape. No poisonous plant materials could be used.

Upon learning of the incipient project, Public Art Manager, Carol Baumann, began meeting with Richard Vohs, Forensic Treatment Center Director, and Doug Spencer, Capital Project Manager for the Mental Health Agency, to learn about the Forensic program. A selection committee was formed which included, in addition to representatives from the state Arts Commission and Oregon Mental Health Division, artists, and members of Friends of Forensics, a patient advocacy group. (Arlene Wood, mother of a patient living in Eola Hall, served on the committee as a representative from Friends of Forensics. Her first-hand account of visiting her son and the stresses of mental illness on a family did a great deal to personalize the patients for artists and committee.) From over one hundred artists interested in the project, the committee selected three semi-finalist teams, interviewed the artists, and awarded the commission to artist Frank Boyden and landscape architect Mike Riley.

After an extensive period of preparation which included meeting with the selection committee and with patients and staff, Frank and Mike began to consider the problem. They wanted to create an interface space where people could meet and also to personalize - deinstitutionalize - the space. The fact the area would always be fenced, be a "caged space" in Frank's words, was an inherent tension which would have to be dealt with

by those inside. Within these parameters, Frank and Mike hoped to give the patients and visitors psychological space and escape through the senses and through imagination. The environment would give the patients a set of choices.

In a recent interview, Frank and Mike shared some of their thoughts about the commission. Frank: "I had ideas about what happens in a place like this - an insane asylum is a powerful image. When I learned that I had won the commission I thought, I have to do something in one of these places. Will I be second guessing the situation? Will I be playing with someone's head? Mike: "I came with the idea that these people are different. I gained. I realized how similar we are. At the end of each day, I was so glad to be able to leave."

The collaboration of artist and landscape architect worked well because Frank and Mike defined the problem and their reasons for doing it and remained open to the other's point of view during the design and execution process. A big factor in the success of the collaboration was the respect that each had for the other's work. In their own words:

"It is not often that an artist is allowed to conceive and execute a project as special and complex as the garden and incised stones at Eola Hall.

"Although the incised granite monolith and granite and bronze pieces might be viewed separately as the 'art' in a garden, they were indeed made as integral parts of the whole. They cannot be separated from the rest of the garden environment.

"In making this space we wanted to create an environment which peacefully gave permission to those who used it to examine their senses in ways not possible in the hospital atmosphere. We purposely made a set of different spaces and micro-environments in which people could more or less isolate themselves. This was a challenge since the entire area covers only 30 by 70 feet.

"We tried to make all the materials challenging and demanding to the senses. We used discarded old growth beams showing several hundred years of growth rings. Huge basalt stones were hand picked for each space with consideration given to specific textural patterns, fracture lines, and curvatures suitable for seating or lying down upon. The large granite pieces, the largest stones in the space, were chosen for their scale so that they would dwarf a human. These large stones were treated with sandblasted drawings. The markings opened up the surfaces of the granite, revealing different colors, and the textural differences demand close inspection. Such inspection brings huge stones down to human scale. In the same way additions of small bronze pieces into a large stone demand that the stone be physically encountered in order to experience and handle these small elements. One rock was plumbed for a small fountain. Several large basalt pieces had a five-inch diameter core-drilled hole in them. One of these stones was set up so that the afternoon sun shines through the hole and produces a brilliant circle of light on a wall. One hole was

fitted with a stainless steel mirror placed six inches inside. This mirror reflects movement outside the stone but also calls into question the interior nature of that particular stone. Indeed, the whole atmosphere was thought about from the point of view of how we could reveal and expose the interior of materials."

As Frank and Mike installed the space, they were watched with great interest by patients from within the building. On the day that the pond was completed and filled with water, the artists looked up to see, on the other side of the glass, a patient holding a boat which he had made. Staff, too, maintained a lively interest in the work in progress and although the garden environment has been in use for less than a month (at this writing) its good effects are already being felt. Administrators in the Mental Health Agency have been hit with a sense of what is possible and plans for the Visitors' Center have become more extensive.

Because of the Forensic programs's need for a secure area, the garden is a destination site, not a space which is a pass-through. As such it demanded of Frank and Mike that they build change into the environment: seasonal change has been built into the design through the use of bulbs and leaves which change color; the incised drawings on the stones change appearance with the changing light; the circle of light on the wall only appears at certain times of day.

We are fortunate in Oregon that the Art in Public Places program defines the "public" in public art more broadly than those people who go to the local mall. There are many publics. At Eola Hall the public is composed of patients, families and friends, and staff. Frank and Mike have succeeded wonderfully well in giving physical presence to the belief that art and nature can be health-giving and the "caged space" is a powerful place by whatever means you use to measure it. One of the patients said it best. He watched the evolution of the space and once its impact became apparent said to Frank, "Wonderful. Right on, Man."

Ultimately, this collaboration was broader than one between artist and landscape architect. As Frank said, "We all did it - Mike and I, Richard Vohs with his vision for a humane visiting environment, the committee, Oregon's Art in Public Places program - and especially, Arlene Wood."