

Log

WINTER/SPRING 2007

Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

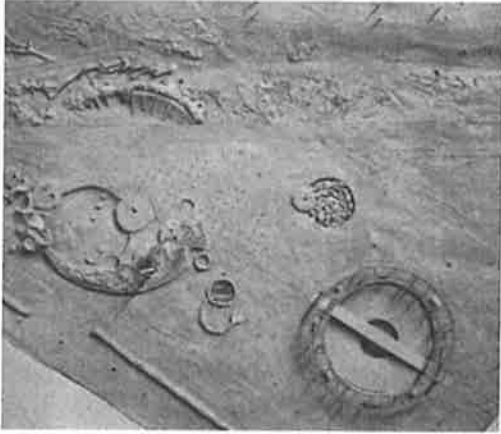
As a “quintessentially human object,” architecture is oriented and ordered within invisible lines of force that project it onto the earth, toward the center of the world. When architecture’s image is transcribed onto a sheet of paper, the tern of the Cartesian axes overturns and reconfigures its natural projection. Vitruvius used the terms *Ichnography*, *Orthography*, and *Sciagraphy* to define the projections that make an architectural drawing universally intelligible. But it was only later, in a celebrated letter written by Raphael to Pope Leo X, that this code was explained and completed in the modern sense. Besides the meticulous description of the plan view, elevation, and cross section, Raphael introduced the concept of design in perspective and, at the same time, devalued it. Raphael believed perspective was unnecessary in architecture, but still useful for “more completely satisfying the desire of those who want to see and understand all things that will be drawn.” Therefore, viewed more as an element of seduction for those who do not understand architectural drawing technique, *dolce prospettiva* (sweet perspective) would seem to have exhausted its symbolic significance.

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A Conversation With Mary Miss



SANTA FE RAILYARD PARK, MODEL.
A COLLABORATION OF MARY MISS,
FREDRIC SCHWARTZ, AND KEN
SMITH. PHOTO COURTESY THE
ARTIST.

Trained as a sculptor, Mary Miss has been producing work since the 1970s that defies narrow definitions. Located primarily in the public realm, her diverse body of work ranges from a viewing platform in downtown Manhattan (*South Cove*, 1984–87) and a public art project for the Union Square subway station (1992–2000), to more recent projects that engage entire urban districts such as the Santa Fe Railyard Park, which is currently under construction. Miss often works in collaboration with architects and designers, which have included Ken Smith, Frederic Schwartz, Thomas Phifer, and Peter Walker, yet her focus is largely on emphasizing the physical and psychological benefits of human interaction with our urban and natural landscapes. Her stated goal is to encourage the general public to more deeply consider their relationship with the world around them by prompting active engagement in a site's latent history and ecology.

Since turning away from the museum and gallery scene early in her career, Miss has since used her work as a forum for rethinking the nature of her profession. Often sited provocatively within terrain that has typically been defined as that of an architect and designer, Miss has proven adept at navigating across disciplines. Intersecting the fields of sculpture, architecture, landscape design, and installation art, her work expands and enriches current art and architectural dialogues. Her perseverance has proven fruitful, as illustrated by her most recent and largest project to date, a new 1,347-acre park in Irvine, California, which she is designing with Ken Smith Landscape Architects. Here she talks about this ambitious undertaking and how she endeavors to create a more symbiotic relationship between artists, designers, architects, scientists, and the natural environment.

ZOË RYAN: *Your work has always straddled many fields, and recently it has become increasingly complex as the size and scale of the projects, as well as the collaborative process, has grown. What is your role in collaborative projects such as the Santa Fe Railyard Park and the Orange County Great Park in California?*

MARY MISS: I have been trying to forge an alternative form

of practice, one that allows artists to participate in the complex questions raised by working in the public realm. I am interested in how I, as an artist, can help shape the conversations in our culture rather than simply assuming the role of a commentator or critic.

It is important that I come in at the beginning of a project so that I can fully understand it in all of its complexity and make sure that my ideas are fully integrated. I am interested in creating a role for the imagination in any project I work on: How is it possible to get people to notice things they may have taken for granted? How can you make room for reflection, for the interior life? How can you give validity to the experiences of the senses? Creating situations where our interior life and the public realm can come together is important to me.

You often place the viewer in an active or participatory relationship with a work. Can you explain how you enable this within projects that differ so greatly in scale?

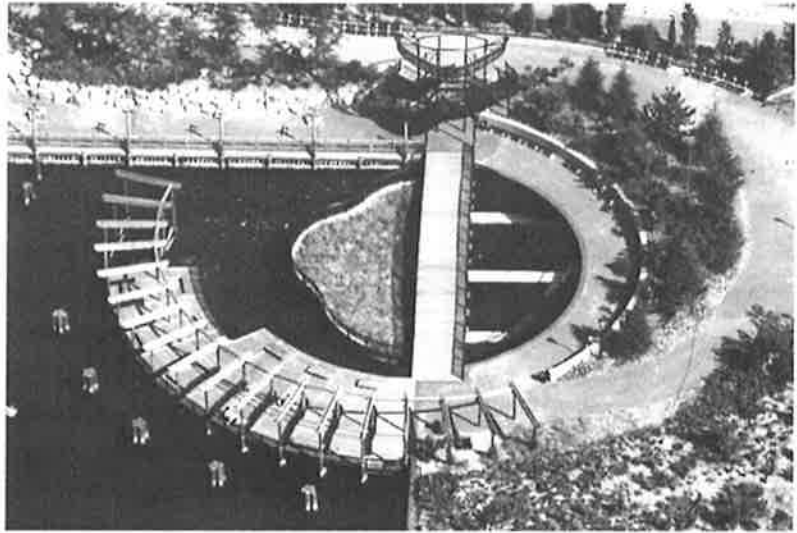
The experiential, psychological, and physical involvement of the viewer is of primary importance to me. I try to provide different levels of engagement – physical as well as conceptual. I like to bring people into a landscape and reveal it slowly. My work is often about perceiving the disjunction between nature and the built environment. I want to get people to take notice of their environment and understand their relationship to it. I hope to take people on a journey from an experiential level to an interpretive level.

Your work continues a line of investigation begun in the 1960s and 1970s by yourself and artists including Walter De Maria, Alice Aycock, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Heizer, James Turrell, and Richard Long. How would you describe what you do and how it differs from your contemporaries?

I found many interesting clues in the work of some of the minimalists, but much of that work was still about monolithic form. I wanted to create work that was more integrated into the landscape. I have often tried to go beyond the idea of a singular intervention to create elements that are integrated throughout a space to provoke multiple experiences and interpretations. I also enjoy working with marginal places, such as engineered structures and landscapes. These places are still part of our everyday lives, but are often overlooked.

For example, with *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoy*, installed

MARY MISS, SOUTH COVE, BATTERY PARK CITY, NEW YORK. 1984-87. THIS HUDSON RIVER PROJECT STILL STANDS. PHOTO COURTESY THE ARTIST.



at the Nassau County Museum in 1977-78, I forged a path through the landscape that forced people to take notice of where they were. When people initially walked up to the piece they weren't quite sure what it was. Was it a trap? A bunker? As they walked through it they were constantly prompted to ask questions. Am I walking over solid ground? What is below me, above me? By taking them under a thin surface of the land I was forcing the limits of perception. The work had multiple levels that allowed for different views of the landscape and prompted different relationships with it because visitors were physically engaged with the place.

Some of your work has a strong didactic quality, yet you have always managed to avoid prescribing a single experience of a place or an understanding of a landscape. How do you approach telling the story of a place?

My earliest memories are of sitting in the backseat of my parents' Chevy and watching endless landscapes through the window. Those of the West were the most frequent ones I saw. My father was in the Army, so we traveled a lot. I remember the endless dribbling of towns and cities out into the landscape as we drove from one place to another. I still see my youth being spent mostly looking out of a car window. So the idea of singularity, whether it is a single view or a single interpretation, has never made much sense to me. As my work has developed I have tried to reveal aspects of a particular place through multiple vantage points. I like it when a site is revealed little by little as you walk through it. I do not make big markers or signs but work to infiltrate a place and leave subtle markings. The point is to take you on a path of discovery. For example, the intervention in the Union



MARY MISS, 14TH STREET UNION SQUARE, A PERMANENT INSTALLATION IN THE UNION SQUARE SUBWAY STATION, NEW YORK. 1992–2000. PHOTO COURTESY THE ARTIST.

Square Subway Station in New York is very low key in its efforts to call out points of interest. When I first toured the subway station and began thinking about doing a project there, I noticed how the history of this space was completely covered by innocuous white tiles. I came up with the idea of red-lining the station – framing fragments of the original tiles and mosaics with bands of red metal. The edge of the frame was hollow with mirrors inside the frames. As people might stop to check themselves out in the mirrors, they might look more closely and find texts within the red bands – fragments about the history of the station. As the viewer stops to examine these fragments found throughout the station, there is a moment of intimate engagement with this place and its particular history.

The open-ended aspect of your thinking is particularly evident in your proposal for a temporary memorial for 9/11, titled Moving Perimeter: A Wreath for Ground Zero. How did this piece come into being?

My studio, where I live and work, is a few blocks from Ground Zero, in Tribeca, so I was deeply affected by the events of September 11, 2001. World Trade Center 7 was at the end of my street. When it collapsed, the dust filled my entire studio, and it took a couple of weeks for my assistants and me to clean the place. We were so involved in the events of that day and its immediate aftermath that it was almost impossible not to respond. Immediately after September 11, a series of boundaries were set up throughout downtown Manhattan, which many people had to cross to get to their homes. Initially there was one at 14th Street, then it was moved south to Houston Street, and later down to Chambers Street, where it remained for a long time. I would have to go to the boundary with my pass in order to give access to my staff. People would clamber at these edges trying to get close to the site, but the police would move them on. My idea was to replace the police barricades with a series of moveable blue partitions that would mark these border zones. They were made of blue plastic pipes with openings at the top and held together with wire cable. They could be easily moved as the boundary shifted, but the open tops of the pipes provided receptacles for the flowers people were bringing. We also designed movable fences and tree-planter barricades. These layers would mark the edge of the shifting site. I wanted to do something that did not force people into the role of voyeurs, but rather allowed them to participate as mourners,



MARY MISS, PROPOSAL FOR LAYERED POND: HOUSE CREEK BASIN FOR THE NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF ART. ONGOING. IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST.

creating a place to leave notes, mementos, and flowers. I hated the temporary platform that was constructed for people to view the World Trade Center site. I thought it was very inappropriate; it turned viewers into voyeurs.

Water has figured predominantly in your work from the earliest pieces such as Sunken Pool (1974) in Greenwich, Connecticut, to Pool Complex: Orchard Valley (1982-85) in Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, Missouri. More recently, the Santa Fe Railyard Park was inspired by the lack of water in that region. In a number of projects you have gone to great lengths to expose the processes of collecting, storing, cleaning, and reusing water in the environment. What continues to fascinate you about water?

I have always been captivated by water. Depending on its form, it can be illusive, calming, or overwhelming. It can also wreak havoc. I have continually worked to find ways to give people greater access to water and to experience it on a physical level.

In Milwaukee, for example, I proposed a project for a mile-and-a-half pathway along the river's edge. I began by investigating how people could get closer to the water, even touch the water. I designed a series of footpaths that at different points meet the water, jut over it, or run down next to it. I located focal points such as gratings in the road and 300-foot-deep tunnels that people can look down to see how the runoff water from the highways, streets, and rooftops of surrounding buildings is cleaned and channeled back into the river. I wanted to combine this with the experience of being next to the water so people understand how our water supplies work. The pathway works as a huge diagram of the local water system.

In North Carolina I am working on a project titled *Layered Pond: House Creek Basin*. It is part of the expansion of the North Carolina Museum of Art. Thomas Phifer and Partners have designed a new 127,000-square-foot building to house the museum's permanent collection. I was invited to do a project for an area on the grounds that incorporates an existing pond. I have broken up the landscape around the pond with a series of terraces – one with grasses and others with plants that will clean the water as it runs downhill before cascading into the pond. People can walk along the pathways between the terraces and view the water as it moves through the different wetland conditions. I am also devising a series of points throughout the larger landscape where I can highlight water collection and storage, areas



where it is almost as if I have taken a lid off sections of the landscape to reveal what is happening underground.

You have worked with landscape architect Ken Smith on a number of projects, including the Santa Fe Railyard Park, and now the Orange County Great Park, which at 1,300 acres is an ambitious undertaking. How would you characterize the collaborative process with Ken?

I often see Ken and myself as opposites, yet even with our different approaches we have amazing conversations that lead to rich collaborations. There are huge differences between being an artist and being a designer. I don't have to make architecture that works or keeps people dry. I can be primarily concerned with the conceptual framework of a piece. The construct is the important thing. For designers the concept is approached differently. Their work also has to function.

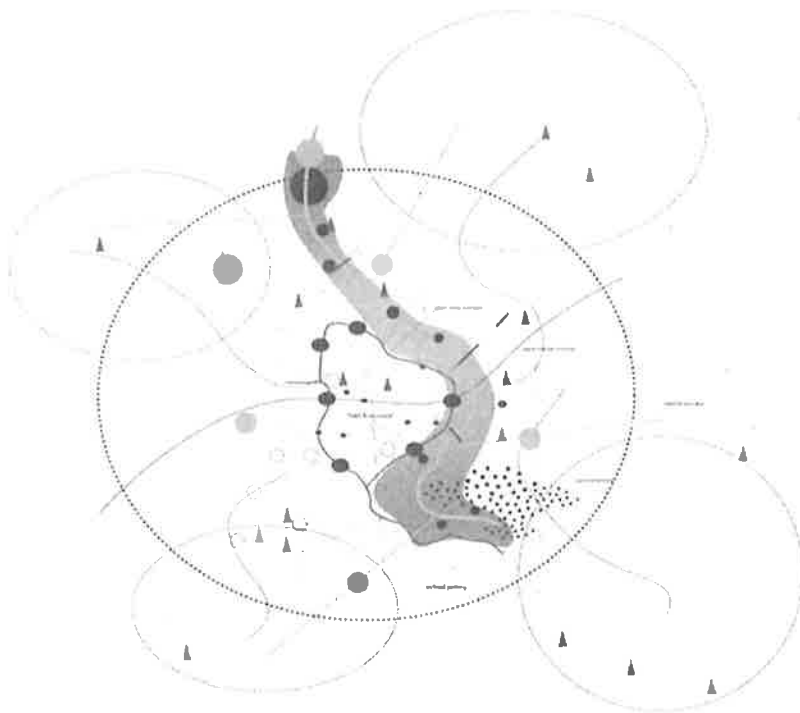
When Ken and I started working on the park in Orange County we asked ourselves how we could make a park for the 21st century. We wanted to create a new type of park, a place that was not just an escape from the everyday rigors of the city, but somewhere people could come to understand the natural, environmental, social, and historical relationships inherent in the landscape. For example, there could be windmill trails that show how offsite windmills affect the park. There could be vital-signs kiosks that give information and suggest different paths through the park. There could be soil microscopes along some routes. It is dangerous to make such suggestions because I don't want to prescribe the projects, but these are starting points. Of course we want to create a beautiful, soothing place, but we also want to go beyond this to produce a landscape in which visitors can take on a more activate, participatory role. Rather than prescribe an experience or way of thinking, I prefer to let the visitor choose how to access the site and its meanings.

How is your interest in water explored in this particular project?

I am working on a number of water elements that people could cross on platforms, or walk beneath and then emerge at their centers. I would like to mark every sprinkler, underground pipe, and drinking fountain as a way of mapping the site and unveiling the inherent water system that enables this park to thrive.

One idea is for a project at the site of the park's proposed

RIGHT AND OPPOSITE PAGE: A PLAN AND DIAGRAMS FOR ART INTERVENTIONS IN THE ORANGE COUNTY GREAT PARK, A COLLABORATION BETWEEN MARY MISS AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT KEN SMITH, AMONG OTHERS. IMAGES COURTESY MARY MISS AND KEN SMITH.



botanical garden. There are two lakes on this site; one is located slightly higher than the other. It would be amazing to be able to walk beneath the water in one of the lakes at a certain point, or to create a point where water can cascade from one lake to another to create a curtain of water to walk along. By the time you walk down to the second lake you will be completely aware of the water and how it moves through the landscape. As in other projects, I would like to make the water visible so people don't take it for granted.

You are also proposing to establish a research center in the park, a so-called "Living Laboratory." What do you mean by this?

The site of the park is an old airbase with a rich history. Airplanes took off from here during World War II, and later, to Vietnam and Korea. This is also where President Nixon landed in California after he resigned. I wanted to find a way to create a park that draws on this history, yet continues to be a site of interesting new discoveries, events, and programs. My idea was to establish a research center for artists, designers, engineers, or ecologists, in order for them to be involved in the entirety of the project and its lengthy construction process, which may take 15 to 20 years or more. The research center will be housed in the control tower of the former airbase, built in the 1950s.

The park is also ideally located to draw on the resources at UCLA – people like Fabian Wagmister, a filmmaker and

digital media artist, or architect Teddy Cruz from the University of California San Diego. I want the laboratory to act as a think-tank and ideas generator, a place where the most insane, the most arcane, and the highest levels of academic thinking can come together. By fostering an ongoing discourse, the park will retain its vitality throughout the building process. The hope is also that the laboratory will encourage interactions that can have an impact on the city, the region, and beyond.

This form of collaboration and engagement is a touchy subject for many artists, who see themselves as working separately from everyday life, detached from the world. But I am interested in inventing solutions. I think artists should be full participants in the world, and should effect conversations, not just be respondents.