

Building the Urban Landscape

Anne Whiston Spirn ASLA, APA,
talks with Hubert Murray



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Landscape of play.
Park Citroën.
Paris, France.

Anne Whiston Spirn ASLA, APA, recently returned to Boston as a professor of landscape architecture and planning at MIT. From 1986 to 2000, she was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, where she chaired the department of landscape architecture and planning and served as co-director of the urban-studies program. She is the author of *The Language of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1998) and *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (Basic Books, 1984).

Hubert Murray AIA, RIBA, principal of Hubert Murray Architect + Planner in Cambridge; his work has included projects in the United States, Britain and East Africa. He has also taught architecture in London and Nairobi.

Murray: You've recently returned to Boston to join the faculty at MIT after 15 years at the University of Pennsylvania. What are some of the differences that you've notice on your return?

Spirn: Boston is booming and it's a stark contrast to Philadelphia. People here in Boston cannot appreciate the devastation that is occurring in many American cities because the problems here are of rising housing costs as opposed to falling housing costs, of increased population as opposed to decreased population. It's quite different from the problems of cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. The thing that struck me first was the strong economy, and the resulting flip side to familiar problems. Philadelphia today is facing the issue that Boston was struggling with in the early '80s when I last lived here here: what to do with thousands of vacant house lots.

The flip side of the problem is that Philadelphia — unlike Boston — is not experiencing market pressure to develop them right away, and so can take the time to rethink what should built, what should remain open, how to consolidate infrastructure — to rethink the future shape of the city. Boston doesn't have that luxury because of the strong economy. And that's one flip-side to Boston's strength. The other, of course, is experienced by many people who don't have the means to purchase a home or pay the rent in neighborhoods where they grew up and fully expected to stay. There are different problems here.

The other thing that struck me in coming back to Boston is how much has changed in terms of water quality in Boston Harbor. Today there are actually swimmable beaches, and it's a very striking difference.

Murray: You developed an agenda for your work in Boston that centered around those very issues: water, vacant lots, and public places. What happened to those interests when you went to Philadelphia?

Spirn: One of the reasons that I debated about going to Philadelphia was that I was loath to leave the work that I had begun here with Boston Urban Gardeners and with the Dudley Street neighborhood — I knew that exciting things were going to be happening here. I had been teaching studios at the Harvard Graduate School of Design that looked at the potential for vacant land in the city. In the course of that work, I discovered a correlation between large-scale vacant lands in inner-city neighborhoods and buried flood plains. I looked at a proposed development for one large vacant site. There was a reason why that land was vacant — and it wasn't due only to arson and disinvestment. There's a buried flood plain there. The developers laughed at me at first, but over the course of the studio with students documenting the history of the neighborhood, they became convinced and eventually modified their site plan accordingly.

But Philadelphia posed a great opportunity. Ian McHarg had been my mentor, and I was offered the opportunity to succeed him as the chair of the department of landscape architecture and planning at the University of Pennsylvania. As my husband said, it was the job of the decade.

When I got to Philadelphia, it turned out that the president of the university, Sheldon Hackney, had been in discussions with the Pew Charitable Trust about funding a greening project for West Philadelphia. They had been thinking about the project more as literally greening — developing community gardens and planting street trees. I persuaded them to broaden the project scope, so that the greening projects would be done within the context of larger environmental thinking.

It was natural for me to look at the flood plain/vacant land phenomenon in that area — I had actually done work there on the subject for my master's thesis in the '70s. The Mill Creek watershed drains almost two-thirds of West Philadelphia, and I immediately noticed the same phenomenon that I had seen in Boston: the vacant land is the low-lying land. These lots, of course, aren't the same as “missing teeth” and vacant corners, which occur within city blocks and are often the result of economic processes.

Murray: I've been working in a city just outside Boston, in a neighborhood where there are a lot of “missing teeth” — partly as a result of the city's “weed-and-seed” program — which is weeding out the drug dealers and then demolishing drug houses through a zero-tolerance policy. No sooner had the city started the program when it realized there were consequences — namely missing teeth in the neighborhoods.

Spirn: Right. But in a densely built-up neighborhood, this can also be a benefit — particularly if a lot is adopted by the adjoining owner. The ones in Philadelphia have been used for off-street parking and gardens, because the housing stock in Philadelphia tends to be very dense rowhousing with relatively few neighborhood parks.

Murray: Did anything come of your observations of the flood-plain phenomenon in Philadelphia?

Spirm: I started to launch the same kinds of proposals that I'd launched in Boston. The Philadelphia Water Department — just like Boston — had been under the gun from EPA to clean up their combined sewer overflows. The city had whole square blocks of vacant bottom land. Now, 15 years later — and it's taken 15 years — the Philadelphia Water Department has embraced these ideas and has made the Mill Creek neighborhood, where I've been focusing my work since 1987, a demonstration area. They will be developing a series of comprehensive storm-water management strategies and redeveloping vacant land as storm-water retention facilities that are also neighborhood resources.

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Ascent.
Hill of Remembrance, Forest Cemetery.
Stockholm.

Murray: What is interesting is that you haven't mentioned the Parks Department. You're talking about infrastructure here, which is the fundamental premise of your early book, *The Granite Garden* — that landscape is actually part of the infrastructure of cities.

Spirm: Yes, absolutely. I define landscape more broadly than many people might. To me, buildings and cities are landscape.

Murray: Your introduction to your more recent book, *The Language of Landscape*, seemed almost apologetic about that definition. I wondered if it was not a response to critics of *The Granite Garden*.

Spirm: Interestingly, the critics came from within the landscape architecture profession — not outside, where it was embraced as

a comprehensive examination of the urban natural environment. The book came out at a time when there was a struggle within the profession between those who would emphasize landscape as art, and those who would emphasize the importance of ecological design. McHarg, in the '60s, had reintroduced the larger environmental concerns that had been present earlier in the field. But, as often happens, the disciples went overboard, and many landscape architects, particularly academics, became critical of garden design and that side of the profession. By the early

1980s, there was a swing of the pendulum back to the garden, back to landscape as art. And, of course, there were a few sane voices asking why must it be one or the other?

I think I underestimated the polemics in the argument. I wrote *The Granite Garden* out of aesthetic concerns as well as out of concerns for health, safety, and welfare. But it was read by some people as being more about health, safety, and welfare and about ecological design and planning, which therefore, because of the context of the debates that were going on at the time, must mean that it wasn't about art and aesthetics. I wrote an essay a couple of years later called "The Poetics of City and Nature," which was a response to that.

Murray: I suppose the architectural analogy would be the purely functionalist approach, which is deemed anti-aesthetic by some?

Spirn: Right.

Murray: Your observation about the flood plains, the low-lying lands, has a functional basis but there's a poetry in discerning the pattern.

Spirn: I actually wrote a poem as a prologue to *The Language of Landscape*. And then my editor said, "No one reads poetry, Anne." So I knocked it down into prose.

Murray: *The Language of Landscape* is in fact written beautifully. But then your subject matter is very literary. The metaphor you chose — language — and especially your chapter on poetics are interesting because they bring the discipline of linguistics to your own discipline, which makes us think about landscape in another way.

Spirn: I hope it brings my discipline, landscape, to linguistics as well. I was determined to trace the roots of language and of the shaping of landscape. The more I read about the origins of consciousness, the evolution of the human mind, and language, the more I became convinced that the shaping of landscape came before verbal language and that languages are reflective of the shaping of landscape. Once you start looking at grammar, at linguistic elements, and at poetics, you realize how deeply rooted in landscape our languages are. For instance, let's take the concept of "address." A gate is a form of address. Shrines are a form of address. Cemeteries are a form of address. Laying flowers on graves is the address of the living to the dead. And on the other hand, the tombstone is the address of the dead to the living.

Exploring literary metaphors helped me to be more disciplined in my thought. The value of this is not to show how erudite you are, but to think more clearly about your expression. So my purpose was to help landscape designers, be they professionals or amateurs, to express themselves more clearly and more powerfully. If landscape is language and if it's going to be useful, then it has to be useful not just in professional work, in high design. It also has to be useful in the vernacular. I put myself to the task of testing language and metaphor in a range of places — Versailles, Stockholm, Australia, Japan, and West Philadelphia. These ideas in landscape literature have to be equally valid to ordinary people who are shaping their landscapes, like community gardens, or their porches, their houses, their yards.

Murray: One of the advantages of being a stranger in a foreign land is that you look at that foreign land with a fresh set of eyes and the foreign land in turn gives you new ideas about home. You've also spent some time in Denmark?

Spirn: I lived on a very small farm in Denmark as an exchange student. It was a seminal experience because I had grown up in a suburban neighborhood in Cincinnati and I had spent a lot of time exploring the city. When I was growing up, the suburb that we lived in was in the process of

expanding — so I'd had the experience of watching farmlands and woods being developed. Places where I had played seemed to disappear. But I hadn't developed an intimate understanding of the realities of natural processes — that was all something romantic, something to write poetry about.

Murray: You got chickens from the supermarket?

Spirn: Yes, of course, we bought our food in the supermarket. But that lack of understanding changed after living on a farm for a year, particularly on a farm where the family's income depended on the vicissitudes of weather. I remember we had a very wet spring and my Danish father walking out and just staring at the field that couldn't be plowed day after day after day, checking it out to see if it was dry enough to plow. I learned a lot from him — he had a very deep understanding of the soil and of weather. That experience is probably what led me to landscape architecture.

Murray: One of the things about the current foot-and-mouth disease in England is that it is likely to change the nature of the English landscape completely over the next 10 years as people do not restock their sheep and cattle. The land that we know as moorland both in myth and in literature will be forever changed. The landscape will change and, with it, the self-image and self-regard of English, Scottish, and Irish people. It will in a sense be the visible conclusion of an economic process that has been going on since World War II.

Spirn: Most people don't think about how rural landscapes that they admire are shaped by agricultural practices. What you say about foot-and-mouth disease is certainly true, although I think the British are aware of the fact that the hedgerow-and-small-field landscape that seems so archetypal of the English landscape is a function of the wool industry and is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon. In order to keep that landscape, one has to keep sheep; small fields with hedgerows aren't very well adapted to large farm machinery. More broadly, since the emergence of the European Union, sweeping changes have started throughout Europe on marginal agricultural lands within the EU member countries where they can no longer protect farming. These marginal agricultural lands are being abandoned and successional growth is occurring. I have several colleagues in Denmark who realized this about 10 years ago and got grants from the EU to study the phenomenon. It is a change that is going to have cultural, not just economic, reverberations and it's a landscape issue that countries are having to address now.

Murray: I'd like to go back to your interest in infrastructure and landscape. It's very much in the tradition of Frederic Law Olmsted who, in creating Boston's Emerald Necklace, was after all, simply draining the Fens. But he drained it in a very creative and imaginative way, which has left an indelible mark on our city. In the mid-19th century, one of the functions of the park, apart from the purely aesthetic, was to address the issue of public health — creating recreational spaces for people who couldn't get out of the city, to create light, fresh air, greenery.

What does public health through open space mean for us now at the beginning of the 21st century? We have reasonably fresh air. We have reasonably clean water. We can go to the beach on the weekend. We have two days off at the weekend. We have vacations. We supposedly have a 40-hour week. The thing that seems to be ailing our cities is a psychological problem — our inability to meet with one another, to establish what you and others have called “common ground.” Now that fresh air and sunlight are reasonably adequate, is our new public-health mission to create a psychological center to our city? Is there something above and beyond the notion of green space, the park tradition established by Olmsted? What should be the framework for our thinking of new urban open spaces such as Boston’s Central Artery?

Spirn: You’re certainly right in characterizing Olmsted’s vision as a social vision that embraced health and safety as well as aesthetics and social interaction. But even though we may have relatively clean air and clean water compared to the 19th century, these issues still need constant vigilance. So I wouldn’t put them aside — we need to continue to work on them along with these larger social issues. I’ve been working mainly with public landscapes in neighborhoods, as opposed to downtown public places. Downtown public places belong to everybody in a city and then sometimes become iconic — they begin to represent the city in the minds of people across the country, even around the world. The Central Artery is certainly one of those kinds of public places that has the potential to become iconic. It’s probably already iconic in terms of the Big Dig, which in itself has become a tourist attraction.

The work I’ve done over the past 17 years has really been about integrating social processes with natural processes — and perhaps that has some application to the Artery. How do you integrate the processes of working with people in a neighborhood and working with people in public agencies at the local, state, or even federal level? Sometimes designers focus too much on static features as opposed to processes. So if one thinks about the space not as something static but as something dynamic that intensifies ongoing processes — whether they be hydrological, climatic, social, or cultural processes — the result will be dynamic places.

Murray: To what extent can an outsider pick up on that?

Spirn: An outsider can definitely pick up on it. It requires reading the landscape, looking for patterns, and then asking questions.

Any given place has a characteristic physiography, climate, and interaction of natural processes that give rise to an enduring structure of that landscape — a structure that existed prior to human settlement and that continues to exist after human settlement. It’s very important to recognize that enduring landscape structure — you could call it “deep structure” or “enduring context” — and to develop plans and designs that are congruent with that structure instead of working against it. If you do work against it, not only do you lose aesthetic opportunities, but you also incur greater costs of maintaining the structure of human settlement.

Murray: That seems to summarize your ideas about the relationship between teaching and practice, research and practice, which are integral to your work. You couldn’t do one without the other.

Spirn: No, I couldn’t do one without the other. I use practice to develop theory, and theory to refine what I do in practice, and then practice to test the theory. I certainly couldn’t be a scholar without practicing. ■■■

Editor’s note:

For more information on Anne Whiston Spirn’s work, go to: www.upenn.edu/wplp and www.thewolfree.com



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From wool to wood:
Landscape of production.
Glen Loy, Scotland.