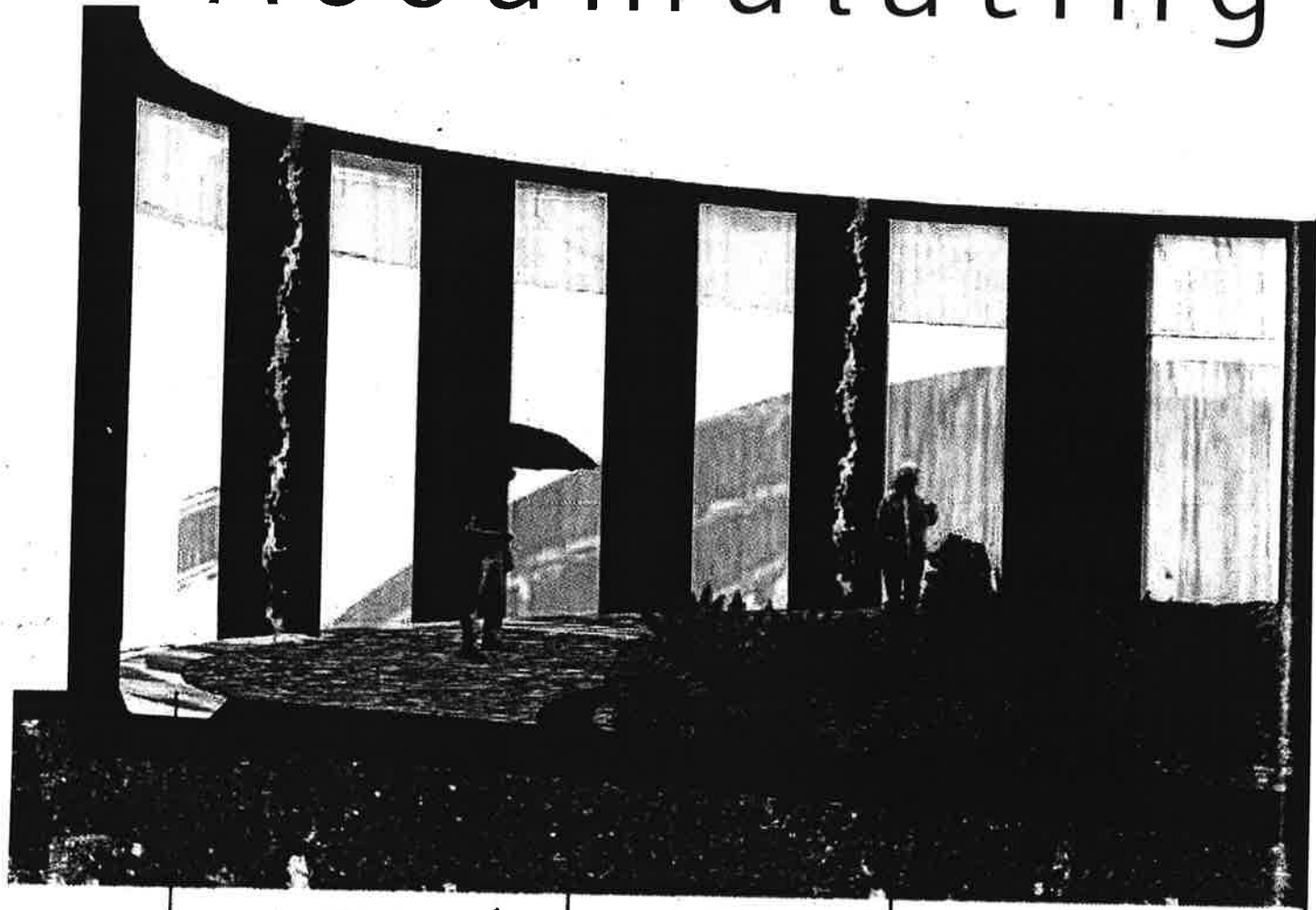


Accumulating



water trough

edging

fern garden

- hay-scented fern*
- sensitive fern*
- royal fern*
- marsh fern*
- Virginia chain fern*

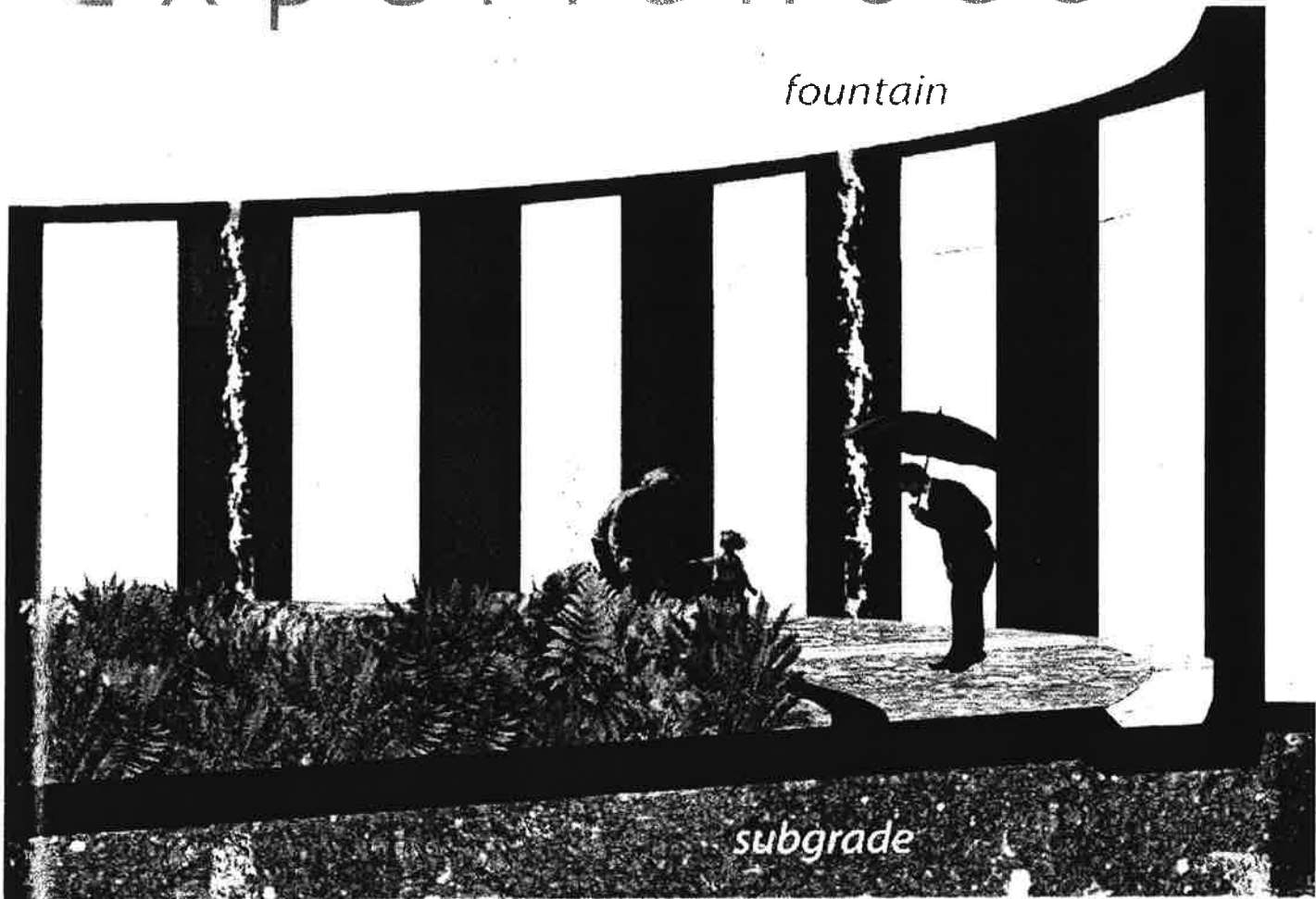
A Conversation with

Mary Miss

BY COLLETTE CHATTOPADHYAY

Experiences

fountain



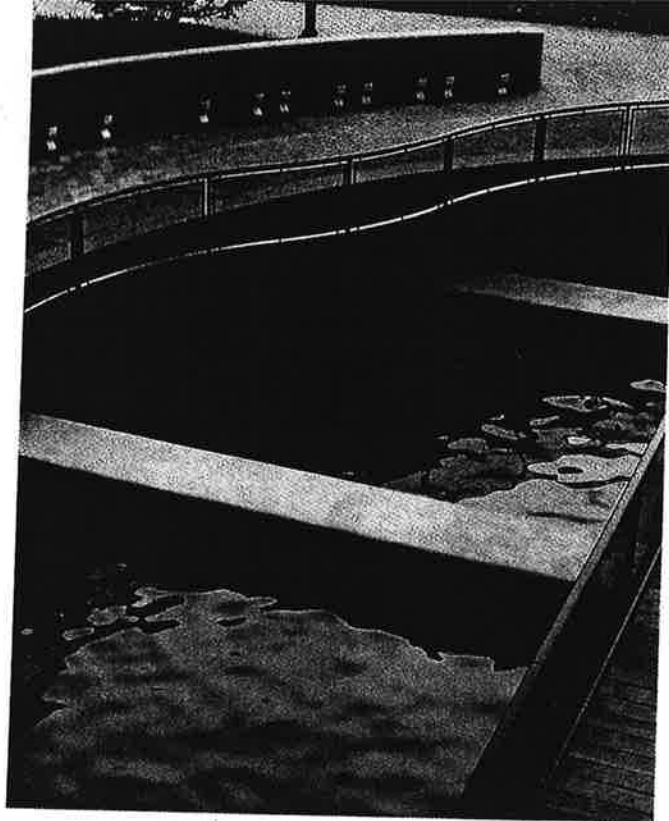
subgrade

In the 1970s, Mary Miss, who was educated as a sculptor, chose to turn from the gallery and museum scene and create art in the public realm. Her early works include temporary site installations and percent-for-art projects. In the 1980s, she was among those who began to take on abandoned industrial infrastructures, transforming them into viable public places. Other artists working in such terrain include Rich Haag, who transformed a former Seattle gas plant into a playground known as Gas Works Park; Adriaan Geuze, who modified a parking lot in Rotterdam into the public Theater Square (Schouwburgplein); and Peter Latz who changed the abandoned infrastructure of a former German steel plant into a wandering garden now known as the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park.

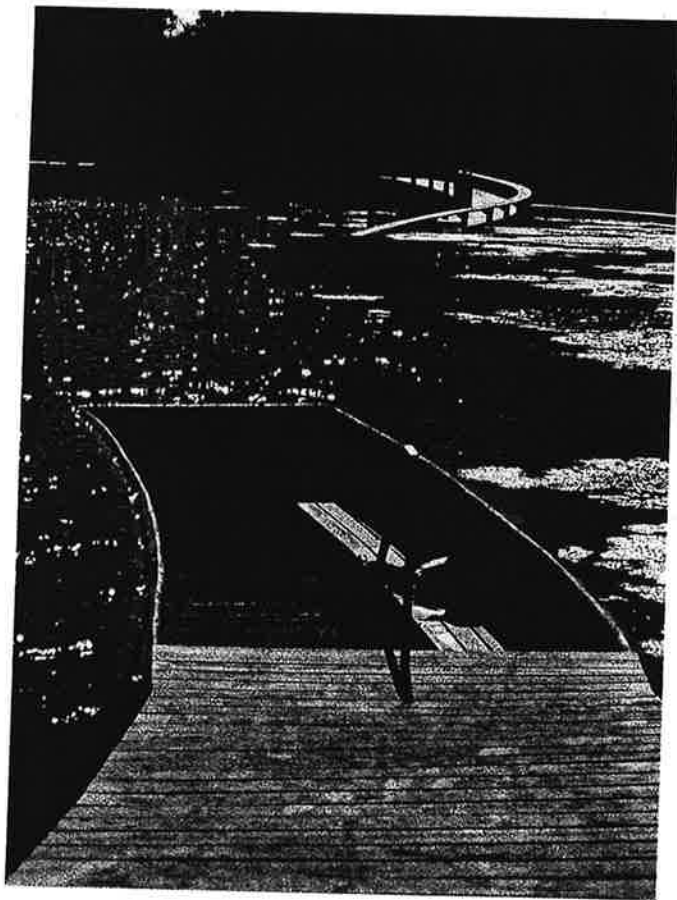
Miss's current team endeavors include the forthcoming Railyard Park Project in Santa Fe, New Mexico, being undertaken with Ken Smith, and the Orange County Great Park in Irvine, California, where she is collaborating with Ken Smith and a team of architects and designers. In Irvine, plans are

to use the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station as the site of an immense regional park spanning 1,749 acres. Larger than Central Park in New York City, the Great Park promises to transform the former airbase, which many locals deemed an eyesore, into a destination location scheduled to open in 2009.

Arlington County Water Pollution Control Plant Art Concept Masterplan, 2003–05. View of outfall structure, Arlington County, Virginia.



Above: *South Cove*, 1984–87. Battery Park City, New York. Below: *Greenwood Pond: Double Site*, 1989–1996. Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa.



Collette Chattopadhyay: *What is the starting point for your work and for your current involvement with the Great Park project?*

Mary Miss: My work goes back to the late '60s, reacting against the artists whom I followed. I was reacting against Smithsonian seeing the West as a fantasy, going out and marking the landscape almost as one would mark a canvas. If you know that landscape as I do— I grew up in Colorado and spent my childhood riding in the back seat of a Chevy—you can't mark that landscape. If you're out there, the sense of scale is so huge that an attempt to put a mark on it, I thought, was impossible.

What was more interesting to me was looking at fence posts and seeing how that very modest, little marker defined the landscape. I was interested in the human scale of the landscape and the conjunction between the built and natural environments and whether these were on a collision course. How to define that relationship was an early question (in my work) that continues to this day. In the beginning, the work was not about an abstract way of looking at that conjunction. But, as time has gone on, it's gotten to be about the elements involved in this meeting point. Besides that, there's the engagement of the public and the issue of art in the public realm.

CC: *You're one of the forerunners in the development of art in the public realm. What have been the challenges in this area?*

MM: Early on, there were a number of us interested in the public realm, artists stepping out of the museum and gallery framework. It was about trying to take on the issues of our time. To me that meant not being a respondent saying, "This is what's happening in the culture, and I'm going to respond to it," as Warhol did by commenting on the soup can. I was curious about how an artist could shape the conversation. So, we went into the landscape and the world. To work in the public realm raised the critical issue of where one would get the money. It ended up that we could do it through percent-for-art programs.

CC: *Which was in the '70s, or did it begin earlier?*

MM: Some things started in the late '60s. But it was laughable. The building costs \$400 million, and they divide up one percent between four artists. There's also the issue that you're given an assignment: "We need a better transition between this building and that one," or, "This is a really ugly side to this building, could you do something?" So, the challenge was always limited to putting yourself into the pretzel position. You would ask yourself, "How can I make this into something interesting?" In the *Union Square Project*, I ended up doing something on the history of that station through a kind of framing. But it's very hard sometimes to get to a subject—as I did there—that you're interested in.

Not only are the opportunities limited in percent-for-art projects, but they never had visibility. I'm lucky. A few of my projects got published. Many artists have done interesting things that no one knows about. There hasn't been a good critique of the work or of the idea of artists working in the public realm. It's really a vacuum.

CC: *Your new project in California will address what you call the "layers" of the site as a former Marine base, lima bean farm, and Chumash habitat. How do you decide which layers to focus on?*

MM: When I go to any site, I'm looking at what's there, what's available, and then taking cues about where to do research. For instance, in the wetland pavilion I did in Des Moines, Iowa, called *Greenwood Pond* (1989–1996), I started by looking at the history of the place. I went out to Indian reservations, looked at farming areas, and worked with botanists and wetland experts from Iowa State University. In the Great Park, I'm trying to accumulate all the layers of paleontology, geology, botany, ecology, hydrology, and cultural influences that have occupied the area. That's my way of researching, though I'm doing it on a more massive scale here in California. In Des Moines, I worked with the local garden club, and they were interested in doing a demonstration wetland. So, we worked together. Someone wrote an article in a landscape magazine, denigrating the garden club as a "lady's group." But these women were terrific. They helped in every way, from talking about what should happen to helping plant all the plants.

CC: *How did the concept of a wetland evolve?*

MM: Historically, 90 percent of the wetlands in Iowa were eliminated for farming. With the wetlands eliminated, the water runs off the land into the river. In 1994, when I was working on this project, all of downtown Des Moines got flooded. *Greenwood Pond* was an opportunity to have a wetland in the middle of the city park where kids could do their science or art projects. There's a science center across the street, as well as a museum, a walkway that goes around the end of the pond, and a pavilion where groups can gather. In the winter, it becomes a warming house for skaters. There's a very narrow corridor of grasses that gets you to a place where you can look at the water. When you arrive, you see water at your eye level. You are [visually] "in" the water, seeing it from a different point of view. There's also a ramp that takes you down, where you can reach over and feel the water. I put mirrors just under the surface of the water so that when you look down, you see all the little critters that you usually can't see. I came to these ideas after talking with people in the community.

CC: *Photos of various sites you've created seem to suggest centralized districts of focus.*

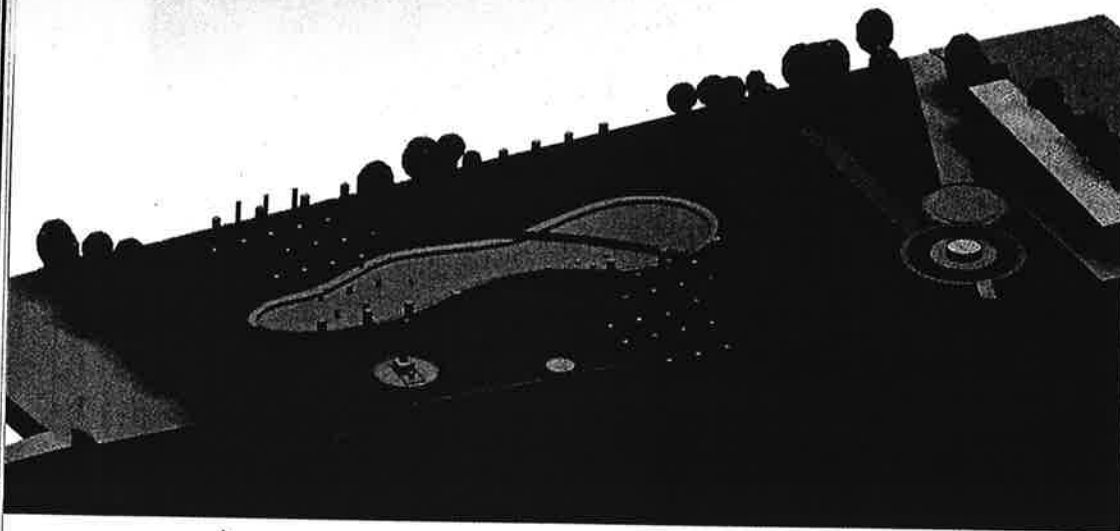
MM: I think that photographs lie, because they have to show the thing. What's more important to me is the passage through time and space. What's wrong with photographs is that they're just about the visual—what interests me is the visceral, the carnal. It's the experience of the time it takes for you to walk this circuit, to go through these experiences. You can go fast or slow, spend five minutes or an hour. But that accumulation of experiences is what has always interested me. I want to build layers of experiences into the site for the viewer. The '70s was such an interesting time, though it's completely disregarded now. It was an optimistic time, but we were deconstructing. We were taking apart all of these frameworks. It was about women being involved and about other stories being told. It was a vital time. Trisha Brown would line her dancers up on roofs, Gordon Matta-Clark would cut a building apart, I'd go and dig something out of the woods. It was a time without boundaries.

CC: *What's also interesting about the area that you, Alice Aycock, George Trakas, and others were and are pursuing is that the works*



Above: *Jyvaskyla Project*, 1994. Wood troughs and water, Jyvaskyla, Finland.
Below: *Milwaukee Riverwalk*, 1998–2001. Milwaukee, Wisconsin.





Model for Milwaukee Riverwalk, 1998–2001.

have tremendous sponsorship, something akin to what Renaissance artists enjoyed. That type of money is quite different from the artists of the '50s or early '60s who were...

MM: ...independent equals. Yes, it's interesting. It's also very complicated. There was a period of decades in the 20th century and continuing now when artists saw themselves as detached. Though, of course, they were attached to critics, patrons, and money through galleries, museums, and the sale of individual works. But, there's another kind of patronage in the larger sense. There are bad things that go along with patronage: you're accountable to others, you're definitely working within a large system, and it's the real world. There are good things about it too because you are where the real questions get raised.

CC: How does that relate to the Battery Park project, which seemed to be a new crescendo in your work when it was finished in 1987?

MM: This was the first time I had access not only to a site, but also to money and people to collaborate with. So those things we've been talking about happened in this project. It also allowed me to connect New Yorkers with the Hudson River again, which we had been cut off from for so long. Remember, Battery Park City and the main park that's there now didn't exist then. At this site, you can walk through the project, get your feet wet when the tide's high, or walk onto the jetty and be out on the water.

CC: Water has been critical to many of your projects. What are your ideas about water for the Great Park?

MM: There are a lot of possibilities. Water is a mysterious thing. It has tremendous force. Most of the time, it's almost invisible. If it rains, the water disappears. Yet, the effects of water are tremendous. We need it, and it's an invisible thing you can make visible. In the *Jyvaskyla Project* (1994) in Finland, I used water to function as mirrors. In that case, I was invited to an architectural symposium about sustainability and the use of materials. I decided to celebrate the most basic building material, trees. In Finland, you're surrounded by forests. So, in a forest, I did troughs of water that

functioned like mirrors among the trees. It makes the tree very apparent and visible.

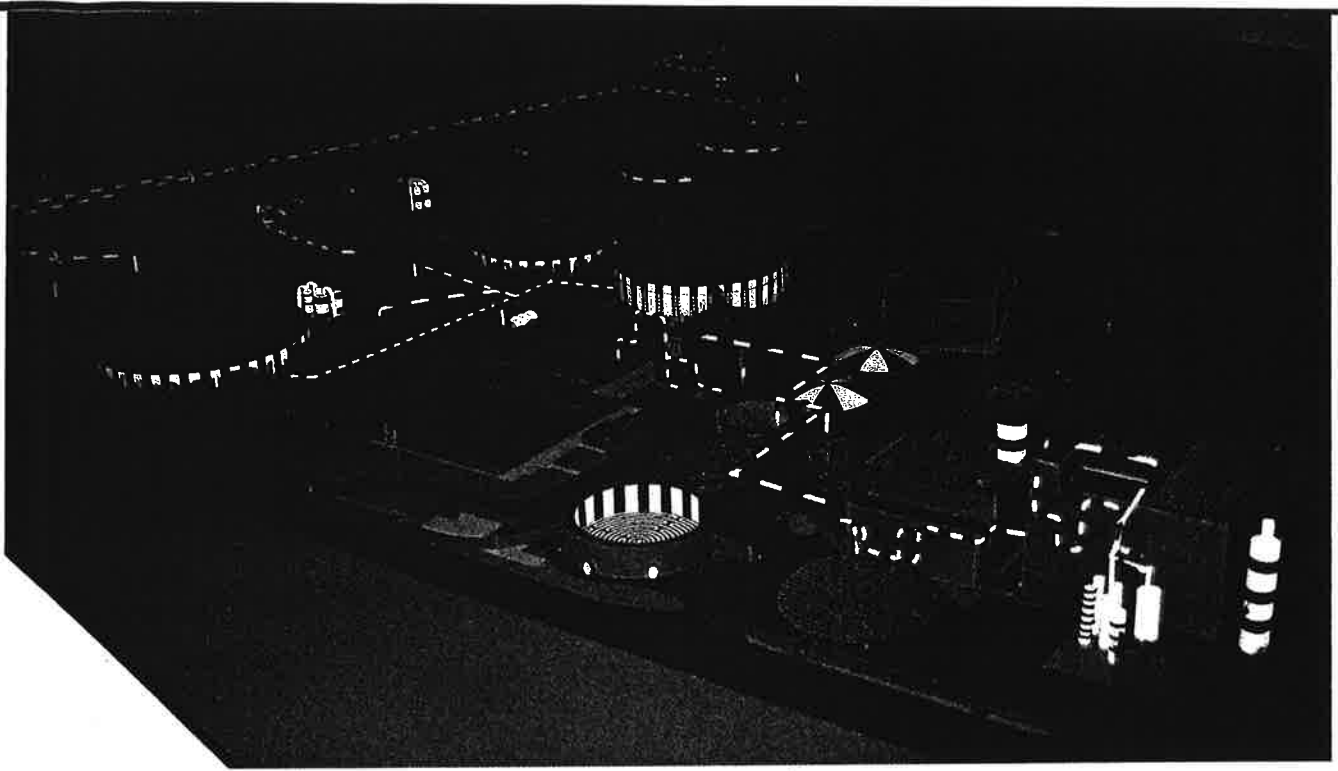
CC: The issue of ecology weaves through various projects you've worked on, whether they're in Iowa, Battery Park, Milwaukee, or elsewhere. It was also important at the Arlington Water Pollution Control Plant in Virginia. What happened in Arlington?

MM: In Arlington, I was trying to make the sewage treatment plant a public place where people could come and understand how a plant works. I was trying to take a 30-acre

site and transform it. You have upscale neighborhoods nearby, and they wanted the treatment plant to disappear. If they could wave a wand, they would have me magically erase it from their view. I held public meetings and got suggestions like, "Couldn't you hide the plant?" Well, there's not enough money in the world to hide this big plant. And, it's necessary. So, why not make people aware of the connections between their homes and what they do in their homes and offices, the plant, and the Chesapeake Bay, because this plant and 300 others like it are determining what the Chesapeake is and how it functions. I said, let's show the process. Let's put big numbers up on each plant building saying Step One, Step Two, and so forth. Let's make every surface green because it will cut down on the heat, the smell, and make it look better. We'll make as many public spaces as we can—at the edge of the plant, in the plant, and at the recycling center. There were big pipes. I said, "Can I paint them?" They said, "No." Then I saw a repair band on one and I said, "What if I put strap bands on them?" And, they said, "That's OK." So, we adopted these things.

CC: What's your take on why the project fell apart?

MM: First, we were making an unprecedented effort. I thought, "You've got people and the way they live their lives, the Chesapeake Bay, and the plant in between. How can you make this apparent?" There was tremendous support from the county manager and the arts programming people within the hierarchy of the plant management. But the engineers were trying to run a plant renovation, and they didn't understand what we were doing. To me, it made perfect sense. They're spending \$300 to \$500 million for a plant upgrade. If people don't change their behavior, they're going to have to spend another \$500 million, not in 25 years but probably in 10. Why not engage the public, get them to see what's happening, and maybe you won't need another upgrade? Maybe you can affect people's activities. When you talk about shaping dialogue in the public domain, that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to come in as an artist, have access to the issues, and shape them.



Arlington County Water Pollution Control Plant Art Concept Masterplan, 2003–05. Model of site with proposed artwork elements.

CC: *Let's talk about the relationship between the Arlington project in Virginia and the Great Park project in California.*

MM: The Arlington project serves as a preamble to the Great Park, in terms of taking on a huge piece of infrastructure. Ken Smith is the landscape architect and lead person of the Great Park design team. Ken and I collaborated on the Railyard Park Project in Santa Fe, which was 13 acres. We've been working on it for four years, and it's going into construction. On the core design team for the Great Park are architect Enrique Norton, ecologist Steven Handel, landscape architect Mia Lehrer, engineering designer Craig Schwitzer, lead engineer Patrick Fuscoe, project manager Yehudi Gaffen, Ken, and myself. Here, we have big, flat land. I was out there yesterday for several hours. It was hot. You couldn't plant enough trees to make it bearable. So, we had the idea of doing a canyon.

CC: *Is there anything there that suggests the existence of a former canyon in this locale?*

MM: No, but the canyon will make an area that's 20 degrees cooler on a hot day than it is up on the flat land. We thought of creating different zones. One will be a wildlife corridor that connects with the water system called Aqua Chynae. This formerly connected to Bee Creek. We think of these as being connections to the Santa Ana Mountain range and the natural systems beyond.

CC: *The natural water systems are not presently visible?*

MM: Part of the water is in a big pipe now. So, we're day-lighting water. But part of these things were handed to us as a package. They said, "We want a wildlife corridor. Here are the park's boundaries. Here's Bee Creek and Aqua Chynae." We decided to see Aqua Chynae, the wildlife corridor, and Bee Creek as connections to the natural systems around the park. And we decided to see the central area, with the runways and fields, as historical references to the site's airbase and agricultural histories. Then we said, "Let's think of the canyon as a place that's going to make

human habitation comfortable and pleasant, a human ecology of the place. There are other issues, like the severe drought here in the West. We have to be aware of sustainability. The community is demanding it, the situation demands it. One thing that's going to happen is a botanical garden. Botanical gardens in the 19th century were places where you collected plants from exotic places and put them in a glasshouse. The main subject of the botanical garden here will be the southern California bio. But, how can you present it so it's closely seen? What grows here is not only native habitat; it's what's sustainable. We're trying to create zones that you can imagine yourself in, to understand and say, "OK, I could live with this." It turns out 60 percent of the water in Orange County goes to watering grass. And, something like 40 percent of the energy goes to pumping the water.

We're also talking about setting up a place with access to sustainability issues, whether they're social, physical, historical, cultural, or ecological. I've suggested a research center where artists can access scientists, ecologists, historians, and sociologists, where there can be a social dialogue. We still need to find institutional support.¹ We would like to make a place where artists could think about these things and possibly do some projects. We don't know what the structure is yet, but we're trying to make something possible here.

Notes

¹ As this article goes to press, a proposal has emerged between the City of Irvine, where the Great Park is based, and the Lennar Corporation. Under the terms of the proposal, the Lennar Corporation will advance \$200 million for the construction of public buildings in the Great Park over the next three years. Buildings under discussion include a Visitor and Conference Center, a Multicultural Center, a Gateway and Transportation Center, and a Center for Community Organizations. Plans outline that the Lennar Corporation will oversee the construction of the Orange County Great Park under the direction of the Orange County Great Park Corporation and the City of Irvine, which hired the Smith/Miss/Garden/Handel/Lehrer design team.

Collette Chattopadhyay lives in the Los Angeles basin and is a contributing editor for Sculpture.