

GREENWOOD POND: DOUBLE SITE

Not An Object In The Landscape

Before Miss began her project, Greenwood Pond was a derelict, neglected-looking place. With minimal reconfiguration of the natural elements, and the addition of new structures and new plantings, Greenwood Pond: Double Site introduced a place that is appealing, accessible and educational.

(Far Right) Viewing pavilion and metal grate walkway in wetland environment.

(Below Right) Plan drawing of Greenwood Pond.

Project: Greenwood Pond: Double Site

Location: Greenwood Park, Des Moines, IA

Coalition Team: Des Moines Art Center, Founders Garden Club, Des Moines Science Center, Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department, City of Des Moines

Artist: Mary Miss, New York, NY

Architect: Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck Architecture; Kirk Blunck, FAIA; Stephen Knowles, AIA Des Moines, IA

Structural Engineer: Charles Saul Engineering, Des Moines, IA

Mech./Elec. Engineer: Paul Walters Consulting Engineers, Des Moines, IA

General Contractor: Christensen Corporation, Des Moines, IA

Site Work: McAninch Corporation, West Des Moines, IA

Photographer: Assassi Productions, Santa Barbara, CA

Photography: courtesy of Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck Architecture.

LEA ROSSEN DELONG

When Mary Miss began her career as an artist, she rejected the idea of her art as a monolithic, specific object. Instead, she moved toward a concept similar to something spread along a landscape that would develop like an experience over time. Her art, similar to an experience, would contain not only the structure she had built, but the memories and expectations brought to it by the viewer.

Soon, she would unveil her most recent project in which these goals would be accomplished. Placed at the south end of Greenwood Park in Des Moines, Greenwood Pond: Double Site has a variety of roles to play: a project of the Des Moines Art Center's Sculpture Park; an urban wetlands restoration sponsored by the Founders Garden Club of Des Moines; an outdoor classroom for the nearby Science Center of Iowa; and a park and recreational facility of the Des Moines city park system. For all of these groups, and most particularly for the public, Miss' work both preserves and enhances a well-known, often-visited place in the city.



Before Miss began her project, Greenwood Pond was a derelict, neglected-looking site with a few dilapidated structures nearby. With minimal reconfiguration of the natural elements, and the addition of new structures and new plantings, Greenwood Pond: Double Site introduced a site that is appealing, accessible and educational. Walkways that dip and rise trace parts of the pond's edge. Other walkways stretch out into the water, sometimes at the level of the water itself and, at the

northeast section, lead to a high viewing pavilion from which one can look out over the pond and wetlands. From an earthen mound on the eastern edge of the pond, one can capture another view. The narrow channel of water that moves down from the hillside and broadens out to join the pond intersects with an elevated wooden walkway that changes to a gravel path as it passes an additional platform. A second and larger bridge connects the two sides of a short finger of water before the walkway stretches to a covered pavilion. This structure replaces the old warming house once used by ice skaters that is now open for summer and closed in for winter. Approaching the covered pavilion from the bridge is a set of arched trellises that decrease in size as one travels closer to the pavilion itself. An earthen mound in the shape of an elongated teardrop rises behind the pavilion and its procession of trellises.

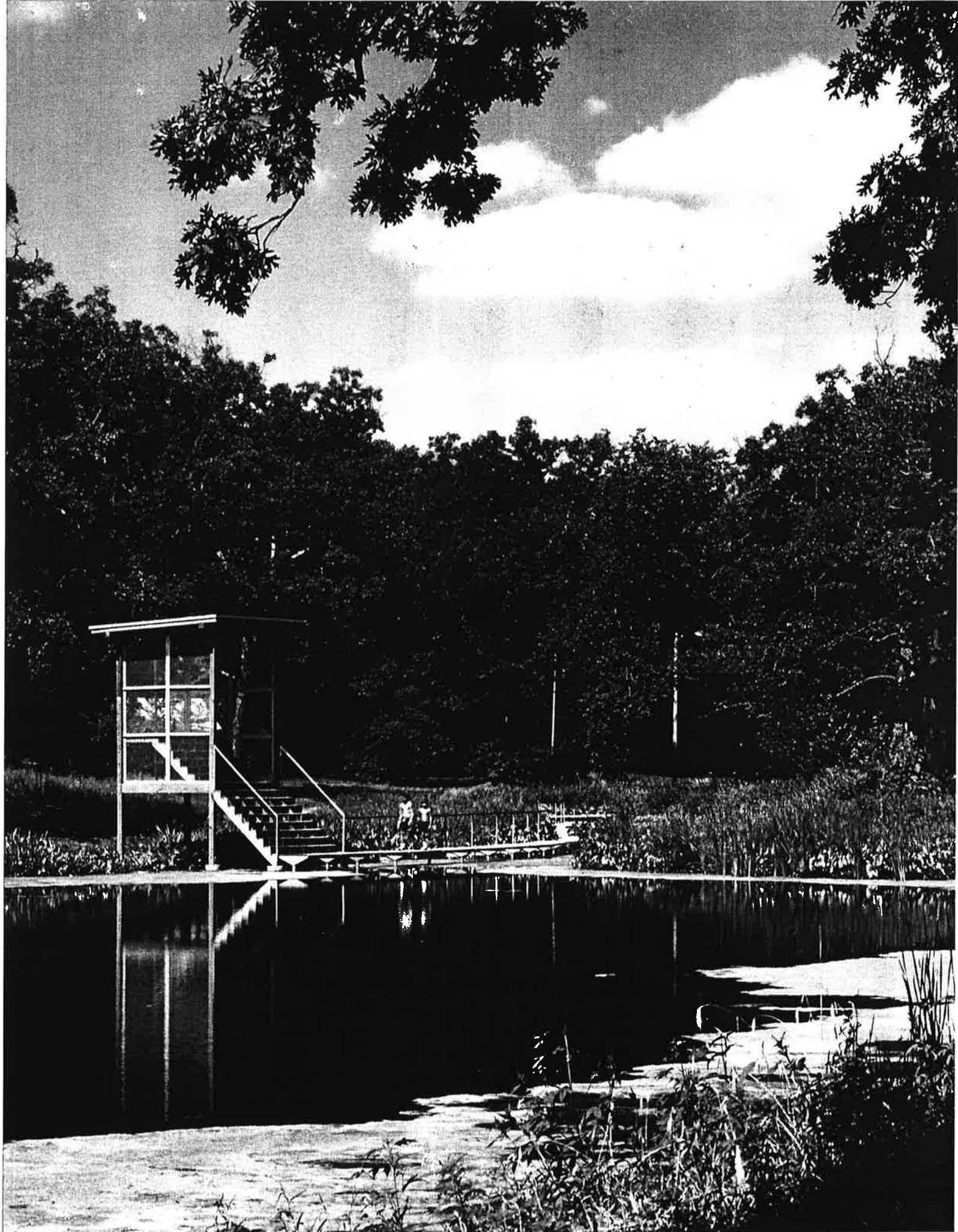
The arc of this area is countered by walkways that descend from opposite ends into the water where their course is picked up and linked by a line of wooden posts set into the pond. The overall shape resulting from these structures is leaf-like and graceful. The shores of the pond are planted with cattails and other wetland plants while the slope leading down to the pond is marked by a series of stone terraces and planted with prairie grasses.

There is not an entrance or sign-posted route to Greenwood Pond: Double Site. There are many different approaches to the project. Greenwood Pond can be seen from a single vantage point or walked along for a slower experience that unfolds over time. Different seasons create unique sensations at the site.

Miss has not provided an explicit content, but has "choreographed" a range of routes and approaches. Her goal was to layer experiences, information and possibilities that the viewer can react with — not to prescribe a meaning or a definition.

When she presented a model of her project, viewers could already see the character of her work at Greenwood pond. As Michael Danoff, Director of the Des Moines Art Center under whom the project was completed, noted, "It doesn't impose itself on you. It is something that takes time to have the pleasure of it unfold. It requires walking and seeing from different angles."

In discussing her work, Miss used a metaphor implying the art of sewing and weaving. She described her project as a "stitching together" of land and water. The organic tone of her commentary reflected her early goal not to impose something into a situation, or simply place an object in the landscape. She insisted on a more multifaceted process and result. Without dominating the landscape, she



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(Above Right) Without dominating the landscape, Miss created a work that is less aggressive, but still deeply affecting emotionally and intellectually.

desired a work that was less aggressive, but still deeply affecting emotionally and intellectually. She found that structures such as fences, walkways and screens, with their light-weight and skeletal nature, fit her purpose.

In developing this approach, Miss recalled the frequent traveling in the American West during her childhood. "You can drive for hours through the Western landscape without passing a town. There's nothing to follow but a beautiful ribbon of fence that never dominates the landscape — only a subtle structure marching off into the distance."¹ The light, space-tracing, but not space-filling character of these fences continues in her work today. In addition to the structure of common vernacular forms, Miss also has developed a preference for their ordinary materials. Wood has been one of her favorites from the beginning of her career. It was used in several areas at Greenwood Pond. It also was a material associated with vernacular building that she could manipulate in ways that expressed her sensibility as an artist. Since then, she has used carpentry so extensively that she has come to feel "quite familiar with what it does and can do. It's like a second skin."²

In planning Greenwood Pond: Double Site, Miss asked to view the vernacular architecture of Iowa, especially the barns and other farm structures. She was interested in the traditions of this area and how she could incorporate them into her project to develop a sense of place that would harmonize with the existing structures and landscape. She talked to people who could convey the generation of memory about Greenwood Park. Moving beyond that specific part, she visited the Mesquakie settlement to learn of even earlier traditions about the land. She integrated this information into a proposal that does not make a specific reference to older structures and traditions but, rather, invokes a wide range of memory and association. She insisted that her work emerge from a context and not be foreign or unrelated to the site. "I'm always looking," she had explained, "at how buildings, bridges and fences are integrated into a landscape and tied to a place. I cannot create things out of context. I cannot dream something and believe I will find a place for it, because the idea comes from the specific context that it must tie

into a site or it will not have any meaning."³

She hopes not to deny the layers of meaning and memory that have accrued to Greenwood Pond, but to preserve them and, at the same time, alter it in such a way that it becomes accessible and interesting to future generations. This approach is seen in other projects by Miss including New York's South Cove at Battery Park City on the southern end of Manhattan, University Hospital at Seattle, and Jyvaskyla Project in Finland in which she incorporated natural and existing elements into her design.

Miss recognized that Greenwood Pond was a locus of controversy, and different groups had various hopes for how it could be used. The coalition of community groups that eventually formed to restore the pond was a central factor in Miss' design process. Her introduction came in 1989 when she was invited by former Art Center Director Julia Brown Turrell to participate in her vision for a sculpture park in Des Moines. Miss' early visit to the pond site was somewhat discouraging because of its nearly ruinous state. After two years of inactivity, the project was renewed by Associate Director Jessica Rowe who helped establish and coordinate the connections Miss would need with the community.

Primarily important in initiating a plan and carrying it through was the Founders Garden Club who saw the possibility of creating a wetlands environment in the center of the city. Their knowledge of native organisms and willingness to restore the vitality of the pond were crucial to Miss' plans and the success of the project. Their understanding of the integrative character of this enterprise provided momentum. To learn more about native grasses that might be planted at the site, Miss consulted Prof. Arnold Van Der Valk in the Botany Department at Iowa State University.

The Science Center of Iowa, on the eastern hill above Greenwood Pond, had hopes for the area to become an outdoor classroom where visitors, especially children, could learn first-hand about ecology. The Parks and Recreation Department wanted a viable, safe and low-maintenance facility that would retain its stature as one of Des Moines' favorite parks. These were joined by the Polk County Conservation Board and the Iowa Natural



(Above) Aerial view to the west edge of pond

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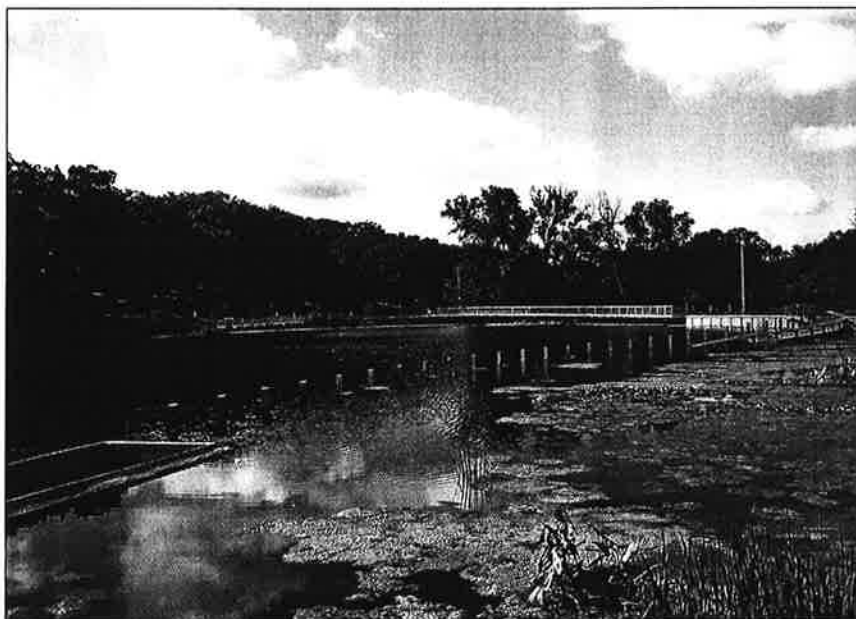
(Left) Sheltered observation is provided by pavilion structures.

(Below) The structural rhythm of post provide a visual link between the ramped walkway and the recessed walkway.

Heritage Foundation. All forces worked together in a complex process that focused to a great degree on the design Miss was developing.

An important liaison in helping participants understand both the specifics and the intent of Miss' proposal was Des Moines architect Kirk Blunck, FAIA. In discussing his role, he explained, "People are generally concerned about embracing something that they have never seen or experienced before, or even a way of building that they have never experienced for themselves. Yet, that's exactly what the Greenwood Pond project is about. There is a ramp that descends into the water, a concrete trough, an elevated viewing pavilion, and a steel grate walkway that extends over the marshland. Each of these elements were attacked and criticized because people were not certain how they would work. They worried the elements may be dangerous or pose a risk. If the details had been changed, it would have significantly compromised the artist's vision. My role was often to explain that although there was some risk involved, it was a manageable risk worth doing. Just because it had never been seen before was not reason enough to reject it. In fact, it was the reason to stand behind it, and insure it would be built and developed as the artist had envisioned."

A collaborative situation such as this one has been common in Miss' career, and she regards it as an asset. She realized that Greenwood Pond will not only be an extension of the Art Center, but will serve multiple functions for the public. She is not working by herself or for herself alone. Miss described how she as an artist might develop a "path," but as the project continues, she is constantly being pushed out of that path by the needs and wishes of others. Without compromising her basic vision, Miss found that her involvement with others is beneficial to the integrity of the final project. With public art, her structure is only part of the life of the work — the rest is provided by those who see it; who bring it to their own memories and sense of place; and whose imaginations are provoked by what the artist has done. According to Miss, "When you put something in a public place, you've only done half of the work—half of the piece. The situation or the piece is really completed by the public who come to see that work



and interact with it. You don't have complete control like putting a painting up on a wall in a studio. You're only part of the framework here. The other half is completely unknown."⁴

This layered meaning is reflected in the title Miss chose, Greenwood Pond: Double Site. Her work is reflected in the site-specific project, but that work is inseparable from the wetlands restoration that was initiated in the community itself. Our "sight" of Greenwood Pond is doubled as we contemplate the harmony of art and nature at this distinctive and memorable site.

Lea Rossen DeLong is Director of the Anderson Gallery at Drake University and Lecturer at the Des Moines Art Center.

1. Mary Miss, *Projects, 1966-87*, London: Architectural Association, 1987, 11.

2. *Miss*, 46.

3. *Miss*, 15.

4. *Miss*, 88.