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Listening to the Landscape: The Swift Solution

Valerie Easton

"Her civility and smarts help shape our common ground."

The stripped-down interior and glaring fluorescent lights of the abandoned Safeway store don't seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the throng gathered for the kick-off meeting to review the new Ballard Civic Center Park. A surprising number of those crowding through the doors are young and packing boards under their arms. Tonight the future of their skateboard bowl is at stake. People mill around looking at blown-up master-plan images papering the walls, jotting their thoughts down on sticky notes to plaster on various boards. Discussion is intense. Kids and dogs run through the crowd.

The goal is to refresh and redefine the planning for a civic green space, now that a pro-parks levy has put \$2.47 million into the project's pockets. Gradually people sit down in the rows of hard chairs, but remain restless through preliminaries from Seattle Parks and Recreation Department staff. Finally, project landscape architect Barbara Swift steps to the podium and it's as if someone had hit a gong. People quiet down, shush their children and lean forward to listen intently.

Swift looks out over half glasses with a smile, waves her hands about and speaks of the generosity of the Ballard community and the green park's



Barbara Swift at a rare moment of repose in her courtyard garden - "a wild urban refuge."

potential legacy. She focuses people's ideas on the long view and the common good. Her concise, confident way with words, her warm presence and comfortable, unhurried demeanor ensures an orderly, participatory session where civility reigns, work gets done and everyone feels heard.

Throughout the evening, Swift's laughter rings out of the groups that gather around her. She's tirelessly polite, even to the guy with the parrot who insists that the decrepit Safeway remain intact to use as an out-of-cage exercise park for pet birds. She questions, confirms, encourages the free flow of opinion. She refrains from pointing things out, correcting or defending. Through active engagement, Swift is establishing an intimacy and connection with the crowd, acknowledging that people feel passionately about their skate bowl, agreeing it's cool to see guys "shredding it up" on their boards.

Swift appears undaunted by the bombardment of competing needs, visions and desires: she ponders why they want what they want, drawing them out, one at a time, to explain their thoughts. Only then can she understand well enough to explore design ideas outside of the typical and the expected. She's here to listen because she truly thinks that gaining the



In her office, Swift goes over monorail plans with staff members Melanie Davies, left, and Craig Skipton. Swift's small firm has more than 20 other projects on the boards.

confidence of a client or a community is what gives her the ability to design. "As a process, this has purity about it – it's not politicized," she explains. Swift genuinely enjoys mixing it up with the public. In fact, it is hard to believe she'd rather be anywhere else than here, in the midst of a jostling bunch of people in this echoing old building on a chilly late-October evening.

You also wouldn't guess she had any other projects on her mind. But in fact, nearly 20 active jobs are on the boards at Swift & Company. For the past nine months, the small firm of Swift and five other landscape architects has been working full tilt on an astonishingly wide range of projects, from the Seattle monorail to the new Peace Arch Park at the Blaine border crossing into Canada.

Only about 10 percent of Swift's work is residential. That's because it "demands that people be tastemakers, or anointed tastemakers, and I just couldn't do that kind of work much," says Swift, despite a recent design for a Montana house that won an American Institute of Architects national award for the Seattle firm of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

Her abiding interest is in public projects and all the messy processes they entail. Over the last 10 years, Swift has worked on a series of academic projects at Whatcom and Grays Harbor community colleges. She's completed six projects on the University of Washington's south campus and recently finished work on the Tacoma Art Museum.

Now she's designing the landscape for the UW School of Business, and the firm is starting contracts for seven of the new Seattle Public Library landscapes. At the moment, she's excited about the

Ballard Library, where a curved, green roof will hold a series of instruments, designed by artist Don Fels, to measure the weather coming in off Puget Sound. The information from these anemometers will be brought into the library so patrons can track weather changes as they occur. The theme continues in Swift's design for the gardens around the library, with plants that emphasize a sense of motion to reflect the wind and weather.

"We adore libraries," Swift says. "They're today's great civic projects, one of the few places where you can borrow and not buy." She hopes that each of the library landscapes will capture that feeling of generosity as well as the unique identities of the communities they serve.

"When we interview for a project, I make it very clear what we're good at," says Swift, noting that understanding what gives pleasure to the client is of utmost importance. She likes to design landscapes that shift out of the everyday, provide us refuge and connect us sensually through sight and sound, smell and touch. A client's desires are obviously central to such a landscape, and Swift prides herself on developing deep and long relationships with clients. "The firm is not driven by style – that's what we're not good at," she says – perhaps a surprising statement from a woman whose mother and grandmother were artists and who has chaired both the Seattle Arts Commission and Seattle Design Commission.

Despite Swift's dismissal of style, she considers herself absolutely a modernist: "I love the challenge of considering how little to do. Am I good at it? I don't know – but it's what I'm interested in." This ideal of

doing less resulted in a vibrant P-Patch of a landscape at the New Holly Park redevelopment for the Seattle Housing Authority, where Swift designed and installed a framework just sufficient to meet code, then prepared the soil. The ethnically diverse refugee population, many with an Asian gardening tradition, chose the great variety of plantings that now distinguish the place and make it their own.

Swift's own garden on a large corner lot in Ballard is green, urban and thick with mostly native plants such as snowberry and serviceberry. Seasonal color comes from lilies, blueberries and iris. But what she likes best about the garden are the layers of green light that filter through to the crushed-granite courtyard between an L-shaped compound of buildings. Swift and her husband, contractor Don Ewing, started with the old prefab-steel workers' union hall on the site, punched up through the roof and added a wing to enclose the courtyard. Swift traded design services with architect George Suyama, who created the home's master plan that she and Ewing are still working on. "My garden is a mess," she says of the heavily treed site and walls clad in vines, "but the notion is of a wild urban refuge."

Such a lush cityscape is a far cry from the desolate Eastern Washington landscape that formed Swift's earliest sensibilities of nature. The elegance, power and cruelty of the desert were stamped on her psyche after watching her parents struggle to create an oasis on the banks of the Yakima River: "When you grow up in that environment, just by default your eyes are open and you understand how things are formed by wind and weather." Swift credits this immersion in the desert for her love of the minimalist work of artists such as light-meister James Turrell and Walter DeMaria, creator of a quarter-mile grid of stainless-steel poles in the New Mexican desert known as The Lightning Fields.

While studying landscape architecture at the UW, her interest in minimalist aesthetics was furthered by a year of independent study in Japan, where Swift learned sumi painting and calligraphy, spending hours each week learning just a couple of characters. Such intense focusing helped to develop the strategies she uses today to find the essential experience in any landscape, the imperative of any problem.

No doubt still influenced by the simplicity and purity of the desert, she says, "When you live in a temperate climate where you can grow anything, you need to ask the essential questions; otherwise it's all just a Street of Dreams."

It was a less-than-glamorous experiment in using biosolids to eliminate Scotch broom in the Habitat Improvement Project at Discovery Park that shifted the direction of Swift's work, giving it a more ecological bent. "It was just a fascinating thing," she says. "We now think in terms of energy systems, which is a humbling and useful way to think."

When restoring the South Meadow at Discovery Park, Swift's team decided to forgo using herbicides to eradicate the encroaching Scotch Broom, choosing instead to enrich the soil to encourage grasses. The nutritional boost of biosolids allowed 10 acres of



Swift's native-plant landscape for the Maple Valley branch of the King County Library System won international attention for its integration of architect Jim Cutler's building and the parking lot into a Douglas fir forest.

meadows to grow so lush in tawny grasses that the Scotch broom couldn't get a toehold, preserving the view out to Puget Sound and creating an environment where migratory birds pause to rest on their journeys.

She took a similar approach in designing the Montana house, working with cattail marshes and natural ridges of stone, and using native plants to enhance the existing ecosystem and make the site appear undisturbed.

It's much easier to impose a formulaic landscape design on something than it is to look closely at nature and figure out what is really going on, she says.

Despite the emphasis on natives, Swift says, "I'm not interested in being a native-plant Nazi. Both native and non-native plantings can be exquisitely sensuous." What she strives for in all her landscapes is to choose plants that interlace with what is already there, finding a way for them all to cohabitate in harmony. "Humans respond to landscapes through all their senses," she says. She wants people to enjoy nature on levels beyond just the visual and intellectual. That's why her native plant landscape for the Maple Valley Library treated even the duff of the forest floor as precious, and carefully preserved it for its earthy smell.

Now she's working on a visitor's center in Grand Teton National Park, orchestrating a sequence of experiences to immerse visitors in the scents and textures of the native sage and spruce ecosystem. "If you want people to be stewards, they need to connect on a visceral level," Swift says. "I use every tool available on site and in design to take people out of their bubble and engage them as an animal."

Years ago, Swift wrote an essay for "A Field Guide to Seattle's Public Art," articulating an idea that still strongly informs her work: "The domination of the sense of sight over the other sense has resulted in highly skilled lineal rational capabilities – as a result, there is a lack of richness and texture in daily experiences."

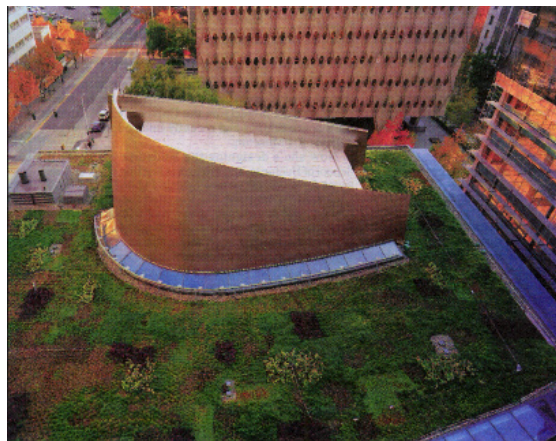
It isn't just the aesthetics of the landscape or the use of native plants that drives Swift, although for someone with her ecological and artistic leanings these are integral to her work. She might be one of the few design professionals truly passionate about public process. "It was inspiring how people came together to solve problems creatively. I'm an optimist about this stuff," says Swift of a series of workshops held to sort out competing priorities for the new Seattle City Hall landscape. The challenge is that the open space and plaza around the new building are prime downtown real estate, and it fell to Swift to work with the community to identify and sort through the many possibilities for its use. Swift sees the space as playing a civic role as a center and symbol of open government – a place that can support demonstrations, rallies and celebrations, too, all on a steep site with difficult access.

Landscape Architect Kathryn Gustafson, who teamed up with Swift on the City Hall landscape says, "She's a great communicator – Barb has empathy with intelligence. You know how rare that is? She doesn't drip with empathy, but shows a strong, clear intelligence and is able to find solutions to problems."

When Swift designed the landscape for the new



Swift's design for the University of Washington Fisheries Building is a highly textual, sweepingly naturalistic design, complementing the sleek building designed by the Seattle firm of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.



"It was inspiring to see how people came together to solve problems creatively," says Swift of the public-planning process for the new City Hall landscape. She was instrumental in helping the various constituencies agree on open-space priorities, including the building's "green" roof, where shrubs and grasses surround the titanium dome housing the City Council's chambers.



Swift & Company is designing seven of the new Seattle Public Library landscapes, including the Ballard branch, which will have a curved green roof.

UW Fisheries Building for example, she first came up with an elegant courtyard solution including a stormwater swale, amplified water noise and a grotto. When the bid came in high, part of the building was lopped off and the budget was slashed. Swift jokes that “we went back to the office, drank Scotch and ate chocolate – it had been so joyful.” But she quickly regrouped, decided the plan still had teeth, and salvaged the essential elements of courtyard and swale. “It still holds together, and I love that it’s kind of wild and textural.”

Marcia Wagner, former executive director of the Seattle Design Commission, says Swift is successful at these things because she has “a great ability to help people toward the shared decisions to move complex projects forward – she has a laser sense of direction.” The key, she adds, is that “underlying all her calm and humor, Barb values what comes out of the process. She sees it as enriching the end result.”

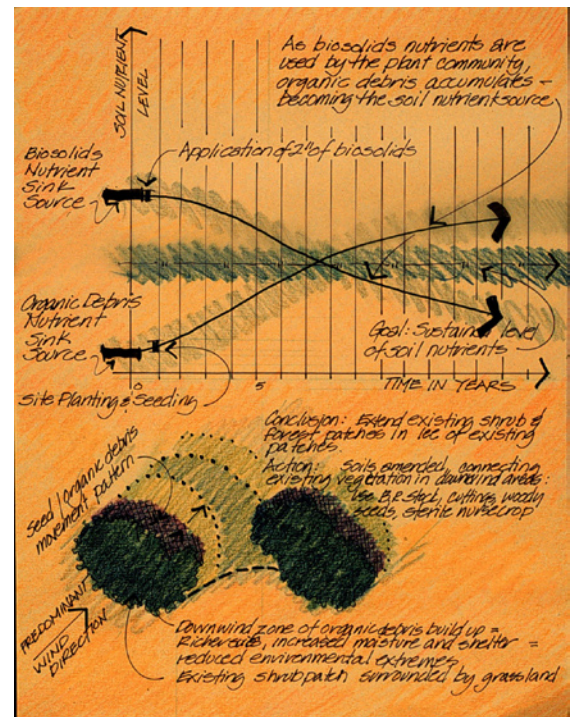
Swift will need all that calm and humor as she move forward with the planning for the monorail. Her firm is charged with developing a system-wide urban design and landscape principles to serve all the stations along the 14-mile corridor. The firm must also come up with strategies for making the landscapes sustainable and help the monorail staff move the process through city reviews.

It will be “an interesting dance and balance,” says Swift, who feels obligated to ensure that engineering concerns don’t override a sensitivity to the urban environment. But at 51 and with nearly 30 years in the Seattle design world behind her, Swift has surely developed the flexibility and realistic perspective needed to deal with such demands. Witness her answer to those skateboarders who were so intent on saving their rink on the site of the new Ballard Park. Recently Swift went before the Seattle Design Commission with three alternative plans. “We made the decision to listen very hard to what the community is most interested in,” she says. Each scheme for the two-acre park includes not the old skate rink but a brand new skateboarding arena.

City Hall collaborator Gustafson explains Swift’s effectiveness in a way the skateboarders would understand: “I trust Barb implicitly – everyone trusts her. There are just no doubts about this woman.”



Barbara Swift’s ability to communicate and inspire trust, as well as her genuine enthusiasm for public process, helps people move toward the shared decisions necessary to design complex projects. Here she engages with a small group to discuss ideas for the new Ballard Civic Center Park.



Part of the Discovery Park Habitat Improvement Project was enriching meadow soil so that grasses were able to outcompete aggressive Scotch Broom. The success of the Seattle project caused a shift in how Swift looks at landscapes: Now an appreciation for underlying ecological systems is the framework for all her work.

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