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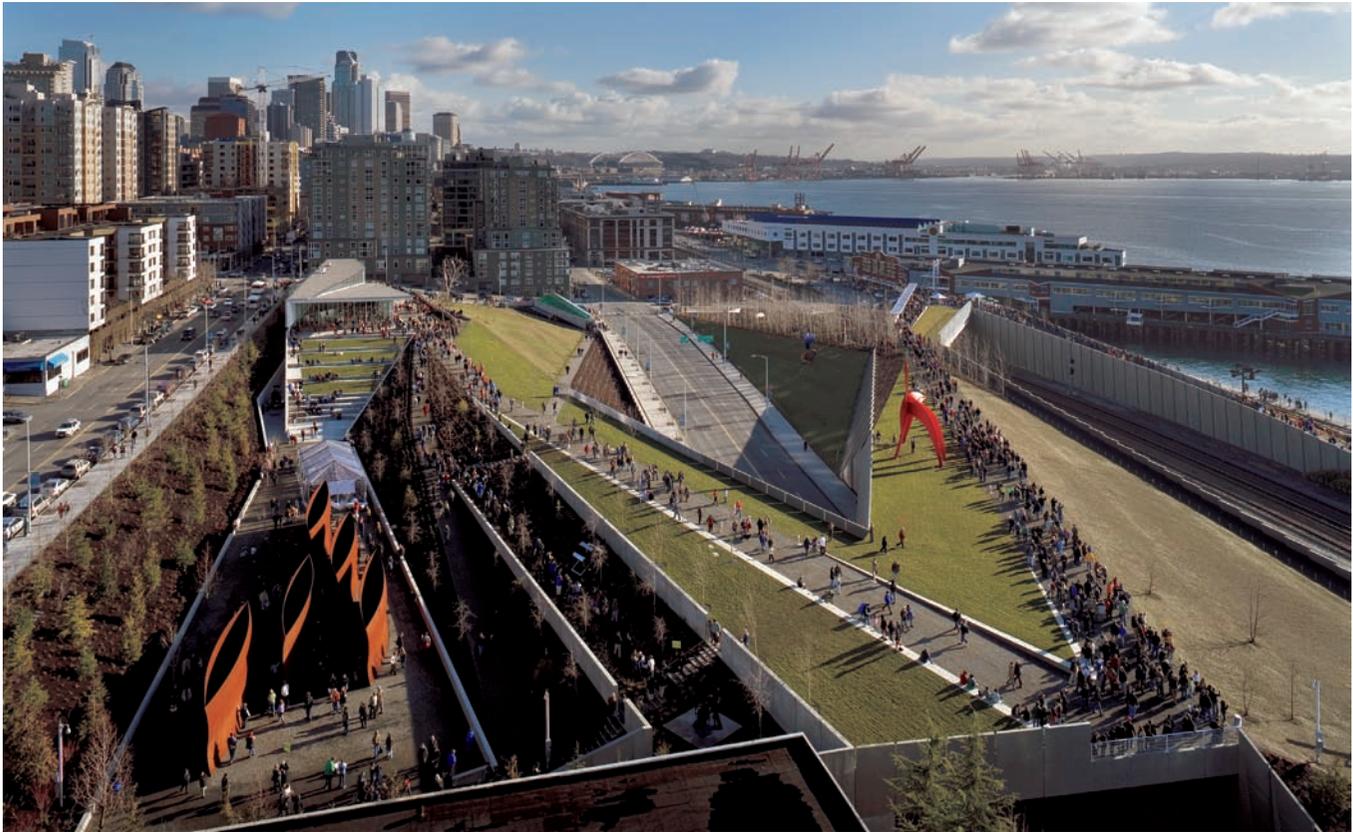


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Olympic Sculpture Park—Seattle, WA

Weiss/Manfredi Architecture/Landscape/Urbanism



When the Seattle Art Museum decided to build a downtown sculpture park in 1996, its plans could be described only as extraordinarily ambitious. The site chosen was an 8.5-acre industrial brownfield incorporating a drop of more than forty feet from street level to the waterfront, sliced into three by active railroad tracks and an arterial road. Yet, in addition to restoring public access to the city’s waterfront across this site and establishing it as a pleasant setting for large works of art, the museum imagined bringing it back as a functioning ecosystem. This not only meant dealing with a sixty-year history of contamina-

tion but also creating sustainable new landforms, nurturing native plantings, reclaiming a section of shoreline, and rebuilding underwater habitat.

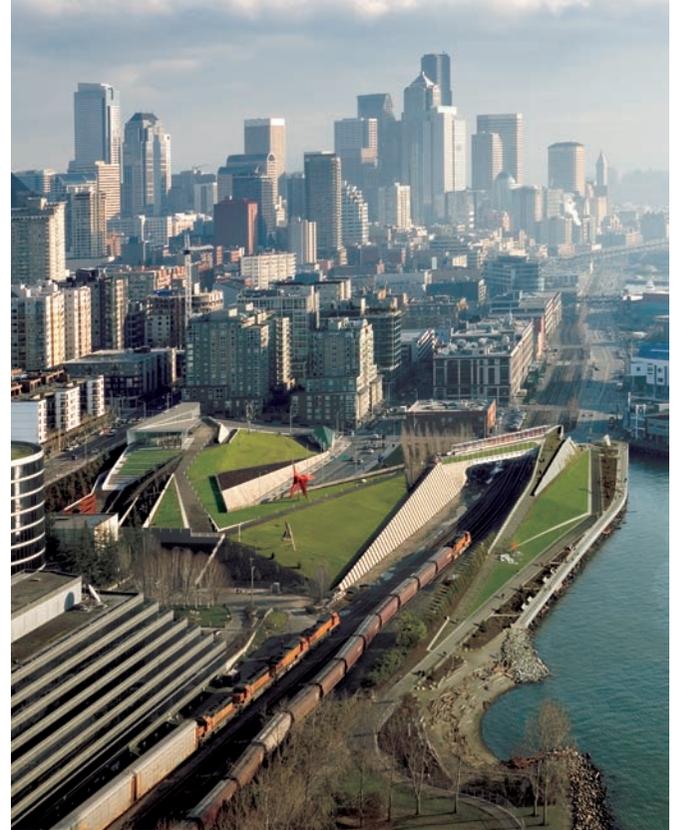
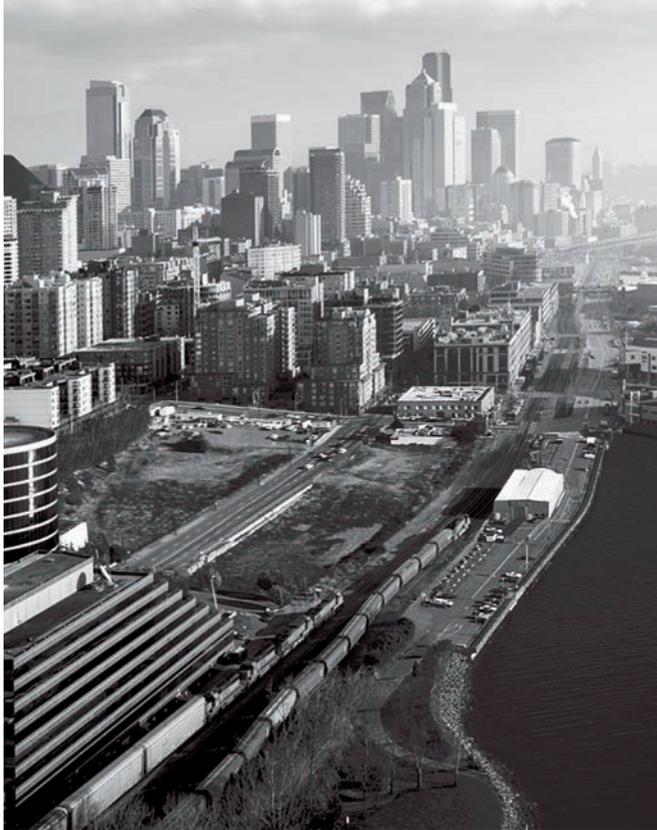
Backed by significant operating endowment from the family of Microsoft’s former CEO Jon Shirley and large capital donations by others, and with the assistance of the Trust for Public Land, the Seattle Art Museum bought the property in 1999. In 2001, following an international competition, it selected the New York-based architecture firm Weiss/Manfredi as lead designer. According to a recent monograph, the program for the sculpture park fit perfectly with the office’s dedication to creating “linkages where separations now exist”—be they conceptual, formal, or professional.¹

The outcome of this approach and amazing collaboration is now apparent as a continuous Z-shaped folded landscape that bridges the railroad tracks and road, creating a new urban edge that discloses the site’s past as a fishing ground, oil depository, and infrastructural corridor; that facilitates its present use as a landscape for sculpture; and that offers a stage for future users and uses.

Above: The Olympic Sculpture Park on opening day, view from the north.

Opposite left: Before construction, the waterfront site included three parcels of land divided by an arterial street and a rail line and dropping forty feet from street level to sea level.

Opposite right: The new landform incorporates bridges over Elliott Avenue and the BNSF tracks as part of a Z-shaped path, creating a new infrastructural system layered over existing routes and forms. Photos by Benjamin Benschneider.



Visitors to the park can experience the new connection between city and bay by means of a path that begins at a street-level pavilion containing a café and exhibition, education, and performance spaces. The path then descends through carefully constructed spaces for art that frame views of the Olympic mountains, to the west, to Mount Rainier, to Seattle's port, and downtown, to the south. Along the way, the path links reconstructions of three indigenous Northwest ecologies: "a dense and temperate evergreen forest lined with ferns; a sloped forest of quaking aspens with seasonally changing characteristics; and a shoreline garden with tidal terraces for salmon habitat and saltwater vegetation."²

The design ward recognizes the means by which the Olympic Sculpture Park has created a multiplicity of new linkages: between art and the city, the city and nature, and organic and inorganic form. It also recognizes that the park represents an exemplary strategy of civic placemaking. As one juror emphasized, it is a project with many lessons: "everyone can use it as an example."

A New Topography

Because of its location, profile, and preexisting structural demands, there were two obvious approaches a design for the sculpture park could have taken: three gardens connected by bridges, or one platform built over the tracks and the road. Instead, Weiss/Manfredi conceived of the site less in terms of its quantifiable limitations than its potential for new qualities of assembly, connection, and orientation. This vision informed their shaping of a complex "artificial topography" of unfolding planes reconnecting the city with its neglected waterfront.

The two principals in the firm, Michael Manfredi and Marion Weiss, have described this approach as one of "recovering" the landscape. According to Manfredi, this retrieval can take the sense of "recovering from an illness"; thus, their work has "therapeutic value for the social and cultural health of the city."³ As Weiss further emphasizes, industrial brownfields can be approached by "rediscovering them and discovering in them potentials to become part of an urban landscape." This attitude means suggesting additional infrastructures, uses, and public activities.⁴



Weiss/Manfredi’s interest in recovering and rediscovering brownfields led to the inclusion of work by the firm in “Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape,” an exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, in April and May of 2005, that addressed reclamation of degraded urban sites as postindustrial public spaces.⁵ It also resonates with the landscape architect and theorist James Corner’s call to consider reclamation of landscapes as a critical cultural practice, saving sites from indifference and neglect and rethinking landscape as both an idea and an artifact—as an “active instrument” in shaping contemporary culture.⁶

In pursuing this effort, Weiss/Manfredi often use metaphors of topography and landscape in designing buildings and open spaces that provide new connections and continuities in large-scale urban settings.⁷ Conceptually, they join uses traditionally understood in terms of dualisms: art and environment, public and private, technology and culture, architecture and landscape. In this case, the detailed interweaving of built and natural elements generates what one juror called a “park building.” Not a building, a bridge, or a landscape, but “all three,” the project fuses architecture, engineering, and landscape architecture. Yet, unlike other architects who have tried to blur the lines between disci-

Sample Juror Comments—Olympic Sculpture Park

Jane Weinzapfel: This is a fabulous project. It stands for what this award is about.

Dennis Frenchman: It’s an extraordinary project. The more I look at it the better it is on so many levels. And you say it can’t actually,...but it does!

Jane Weinzapfel: It engages the public. It transforms an edge of a city that was rough and ready....

Dennis Frenchman: And it gets across those tracks in such an incredibly elegant way. It almost doesn’t

look real.

Jane Weinzapfel: And then using those green roofs as spaces....

Dennis Frenchman: It’s beautiful. It’s a park building. But also the placement of the sculpture is breathtaking. So it also works on that level of what the program was. So I think for the connections to the waterfront alone....

Jane Weinzapfel: It is, in my mind, so far above

everything else here that it is almost like putting other things with it is troubling. And the others are really good things, but they are not this continuum of experience and metaphor and physical connection like this is.

Susan Szenasy: So we have a winner. It just hits every level: it’s waterfront, it’s planning, it’s architecture, it’s art. It brings together a community. It is all of those things that we are looking for that are really important

plines, Weiss/Manfredi has, as one critic noted, “knitted them together,” making visible the seams and the stitches.⁸

The park thus is a “completely invented landform,” Weiss has said.⁹ Its sequence of tilted planes emphasizes the juxtaposition of hard-wired landscapes to a series of discrete naturalistic environments. The path through these establishes not only an experiential infrastructure but also a technological one that serves as a route for networks of lighting, power, security conduits, and teledata. This matrix will allow future art installations to integrate digital media and bridge an additional dichotomy: between physical and virtual space.

From Excavation to Cultivation

In applying ideas of recovery and rediscovery to the sculpture park site, Weiss/Manfredi also built on Seattle’s rich history of land reclamation. But it did so in a way that is as much a commentary on as a continuation of that tradition.

What first attracted settlers to Seattle was Elliott Bay’s sheltered anchorage. But the mud flats at the mouth of the Duwamish River and the bluffs that extended out along both sides of the bay required substantial modification before a city and a seaport could be built there. Beginning in 1854, parts of Elliott Bay were filled with rocks to extend the shoreline away from the bluffs. By 1875, the lumber baron Henry Yesler had also filled the bay’s tidal mud flats with sawdust. Such processes continued for years: from 1898 to 1930, sixty hilly sites were leveled and the soil used to build the present port and downtown waterfront. These alterations, called the “Denny Regrade,” were capped by completion of a continuous seawall, in 1934.

Whereas these past urban transformations facilitated industrialization, the Olympic Sculpture Park promotes a decidedly postindustrial vision. From 1910 to the 1970s, the site was owned by the Unocal corporation and used as an oil transfer facility. Throughout the 1990s its cleanup

included the removal of 117,000 tons of contaminated soil and 15,000 liters of petroleum. This was followed by the capping of the site with 200,000 cubic yards of fill, 93,000 of them generated by excavation for the extension of the downtown Seattle Art Museum.

Weiss/Manfredi believe processes of excavation and cultivation are closely related. Together, they allow for urban-reclamation designs that build on models of agricultural practice by managing land and water as productive resources. In urban areas, this effort involves integrating natural characteristics of a site such as temperature, sunlight, and rainfall with the structural logic of drainage systems, utility lines, and transportation infrastructure.¹⁰

A hybrid of nature, culture, technology, and art, the foundations of the park are a modular system of retaining walls that bisect and dissect the site’s geological and historical layers, anticipating ways it may shift and settle as the result of natural forces in this seismically active area. Working upward, the design responds to the site’s other needs: hydrological, tectonic, and biological. Thus, the subsurface literally informs the surface, serving as “a choreography, a script.”¹¹

More specifically, the park’s hydrological infrastructure consists of roofs and terraces that collect rainwater and use planting to slow runoff, allowing it to percolate through the soil. From there, it is collected in a drainage system leading, untreated, into Elliott Bay without being contaminated by the site’s industrial residues and without creating erosion paths.

Opposite: Each layer of the park meets distinctly different demands. Art, landscape, and infrastructure are superimposed over remediation systems, drainage collection, and existing transportation routes. Incorporating nearly two miles of subsurface power, teledata, and water lines, these layers create a resilient and flexible framework for future art installations. Diagrams by Weiss/Manfredi.

in public space.

Jane Weinzapfel: And everyone can use it as an example. It is already being used with other cities to promote change.

Fritz Steiner: The connection from the city to the waterfront is through a difficult topography. It is just terrific.... Here, I think, also—we were talking about accessibility—although it’s not featured, just the way you get people down in wheelchairs is well

thought-out.

Dennis Frenchman: I like the fact that it actually fuses together the architecture and the landscape.... They turn this bridge, which is an engineering feature, into something which is both a building and a landscape. I think that is tremendously instructive for cities. And that is what we have to be doing in order to be sustainable. So it’s neither a building, a bridge, or a landscape; it’s all three. There is a lot of media too.

Jane Weinzapfel: And it is experienced landscape and experienced architecture. Experienced city. It’s poetic.

Dennis Frenchman: It’s dramatic. If only we had this level of sophistication in the Central Artery [project in Boston].

Jane Weinzapfel: Yes.

Dennis Frenchman: I think it is a wonderful project.



Tectonically, the terraces were constructed with eighteen-inch-deep layers of soil separated by geotextile fabric. This mechanically stabilized earth stretches horizontally to a maximum depth of twenty feet under much of the park.

Biological concerns on the site go beyond new plantings of native trees, understory vegetation, and groundcovers, to include restoration of a section of shoreline to its pre-urban state. Offshore, this restoration involved reinforcing existing seawall shelves with a submerged buttress, creating new aquatic habitat; on land, it has meant creating a new pocket beach, with associated plantings. The combination of the 1,200-foot-long habitat bench and the pocket beach significantly improves salmon habitat in the bay.

Such concern for infrastructural layers reflects what the architect, educator, and dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Mohsen Mostafavi, has called Weiss/Manfredi's "geological architecture."¹² The geological fold characterizes not only the park's design but also its name, which refers to the snowcapped Olympic Mountains, which provide a picturesque backdrop across Puget Sound.

Above: Park pavilion and garage entry at Broad Street. Photo by Benjamin Benschneider.

Art, Architecture, and Environment

A recent dialogue organized at the sculpture park emphasized the relation between art and environment, challenging their traditionally dualistic relation and underscoring the importance of art in raising environmental awareness.¹³ That dialogue also illustrated the shift in the Seattle Art Museum's architectural vision. When the museum moved from its 1933 Art Deco building, in Volunteer Park, to downtown, in 1991, it chose Robert Venturi as its architect. From Venturi's design through the 2006 downtown extension by Allied Works Architecture to Weiss/Manfredi's Sculpture Park, the museum's vision has been transformed from one informed by pop art to one framed by land art.

Land art both comments on the environmental impact of industrialization and challenges art's disciplinary boundaries. As the art historian Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, work by artists such as Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Michael Heizer admit "into the realm of art two terms that had formerly been prohibited from it: *landscape* and *architecture*...."¹⁴ This shift radically expands the field of art practice to include operations previously thought to belong only within these adjoining fields.

However, where land art first brought artwork out of the museum into the landscape, the Olympic Sculpture Park



takes it out of the museum into the city. Envisioning what Mostafavi called an “architecture in the expanded field,” Weiss/Manfredi asked the question of whether “the plinth of/for sculpture [can] be reconsidered as a topographically modulated and infrastructurally enhanced landscape.”¹⁵ They answered with what the *Architectural Record* editor Joann Gonchar called “fittingly sculpt[ing] the earth” to accommodate the needs for both culture and nature.¹⁶

The work of an artist like Michael Heizer relies on operations of cutting, filling, and exposing to reveal the depth and subsurface conditions of a site. So does the Olympic Sculpture Park. However, in contrast to Heizer’s interventions in pure “nature,” Weiss/Manfredi see their approach as intertwining culture and nature. In this sense it is closer to Mark Dion’s “Neukom Vivarium,” an artwork housed in a greenhouse at the sculpture park, which simulates a forest’s functional environment to display a hemlock nursing log.

A Complex Phenomenology

On one level, the Olympic Sculpture Park can be seen as affirming the conflicts, ruptures, and tensions generated by Seattle’s simultaneous development of industrial and postindustrial profiles. But on another, it creates an unprecedented urban place allowing for new encounters and interactions. On a typical Sunday, the park is used by flâneurs, strollers walking their dogs, and picnicking families. Moreover, social interaction has been complemented by environmental restoration: as recently confirmed by researchers of the University of Washington, salmon have returned to the newly restored beaches. Thus the museum has quickly and successfully begun to realize a laudable set of goals.

— Nicole Huber

Notes

1. Michael A. Manfredi and Marion Weiss, *Weiss/Manfredi: Surface/Subsurface* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.
5. For a full discussion of this exhibition, see Peter Reed, *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005).
6. James Corner, “Introduction: Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice,” in James Corner, *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 1.
7. Marion Weiss, in *Surface/Subsurface*, p. 15.
8. Clifford A. Pearson, “Weiss/Manfredi Weaves the Olympic Sculpture Park and its Mix of Art and Design into the Urban Fabric of Seattle,” *Architectural Record*, Vol. 195, No. 7 (July 2007), p. 110.
9. Marion Weiss, in *Surface/Subsurface*, p. 15.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
11. Michael Manfredi, in *Ibid.*, p. 79.
12. Mohsen Mostafavi, in *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
13. “Town Square: Arts and the Environment.” Panel discussion co-hosted by the Seattle Art Museum and Cascade Land Conservancy, 8/12/2008. See video recording: www.seattlechannel.org/videos/video.asp?ID=5210825.
14. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), p. 38.
15. Mohsen Mostafavi, in *Surface/Subsurface*, p. 7; and Marion Weiss, in *Ibid.*, p. 78.
16. Joann Gonchar, “Tech Briefs,” *Architectural Record*, Vol. 195, No. 7, July 2007, p. 159.

Above left: The pavilion’s multipurpose exhibition hall offers a full view of the park and provides space for receptions, lectures, and other special events. Photo by Benjamin Benschneider.

Above right: Alexander Calder’s emblematic *Eagle* shows the power of the site as a setting for art. Behind are the Olympic Mountains, which give the park its name. Photo by Bruce Moore.