

## An Open Space Tested

*No place at Westlake Park for Seattle crowds.*

BY CLAIR ENLOW

Cities, crowds, and history go together. Even before last December's week of massive protests at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting, Seattle residents understood this as well as citizens of any other city. Angry or ecstatic, the excitement of a crowd in a city is like water in an aqueduct. If well supported and channeled, the flow of crowds makes bricks and mortar into something much more vital. For some Seattleites, the sight of tens of thousands of protesters moving through the center of Seattle provoked the sensation of seeing the streets for the first time.

As with water, there is an expectation that crowds will flow to open spaces, to the circulation nodes and city squares that, in turn, become backgrounds for memorable events. But at the edge of ten-year-old Westlake Park, the flow stopped and doubled back on itself. At the most historic mass gathering since the anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s, Seattle's central plaza was spurned by most protesters, although visiting anarchists cut and cavorted across the plaza, and the police made use of the interior of the park to take hundreds of peaceful and not-so-peaceful protesters into custody.

As originally planned, Westlake Park would have covered more than one block—ample space to be called a town square. And it might have been treated like one, taking pressure off the police lines just two blocks away and perhaps giving Seattle more memories of peaceful protest and fewer of tear gas, broken glass, and closed shops. A larger park,

bounded on three or four sides by city streets, would have given peaceful protesters an unmistakable public venue where they could have gathered, faced each other and the cameras, spoken, and made history. This is what Seattle and other major U.S. cities desire—and fear—when they make decisions about designing open spaces in the urban landscape. Fear won out last December in Westlake Park—but it had been winning for a long time.

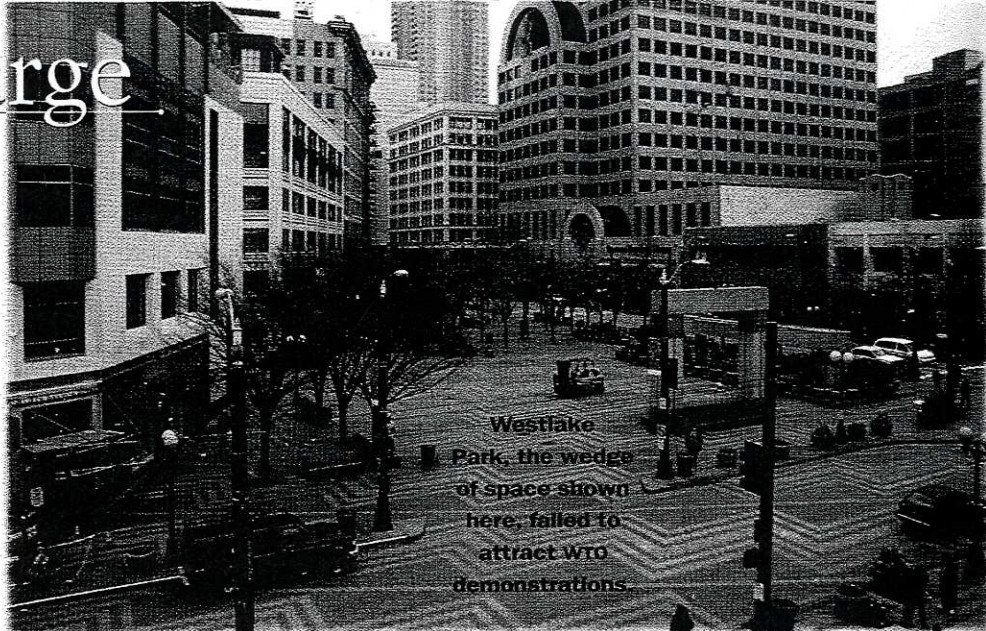
For years the site and the adjacent block have captured the imagination of some of Seattle's most active and articulate dreamers. Since 1962, it had been an awkward terminus of the monorail and an underused section of the city's retail core. It seemed a natural place, in 1969, for the kind of city square that had been missing in the life of the city. Seattle passed a bond issue to cover it and later elected a mayor who promised to make it happen. Then the tug of war between the dreamers and the downtown business community began.

In the mid-1970s, downtown fears about loss of retail business to the suburbs had been recently confirmed. At the same time, the thought of crowds of non-buying visitors (anyone from skateboarders to vagrants) was alarming. By 1980, the lines of fear and anger between those who envisioned an expansive public space and those who wanted a dense and shopper-friendly Seattle had hardened into lawsuits. The city—fatigued from the expense of preserving the Pike Street Market and Pioneer Square and unwill-

ing to foot the bill for the larger park—made a series of compromises that ended with the sale of the block it had acquired primarily for a park to a developer who promised to contribute a bold vision of its own for retail. The Rouse Company gave Seattle the Westlake Center—a vertical mall designed according to formulas that were by then proving successful for beleaguered downtown retail. The mall and its companion office tower now effectively block the view down Westlake Avenue and the symbolic connection of the park to Lake Union.

But the activists got one small and final concession in return for dropping their lawsuit: another slice of open space in front of Westlake Center and across from the park.

Philadelphia's Hanna-Olin was selected to make the most of the remainder of the vision for a city square in downtown Seattle, a 28,000-square-foot wedge of a plaza that opens toward Westlake Center and covers less than half a city block. It was completed in 1989 at a cost of \$10 million. The basket-weave pattern of polychrome granite pavers by Bob Hanna, ASLA, effectively extends the presence of Westlake Park beyond its boundaries to include a block of Pine Street and three intersections. True to dreams of a "living room" for Seattle, the surrounding retail storefronts seem to stand on a carpet extending from the plaza. Ironically, this connection is one of several features of the park that undermine the sense of public ownership that makes (Continued on Page 137)





(Continued from Page 140) a city square. The pavers also extend the perception of private space inward across the small park. Yet during the December demonstrations, the shifting, surging crowds at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Pine Streets skirted Westlake Park as if it had walls.

Indeed it does. A "water wall" under a heavy, sixty-four-foot-long stone arch provides an interactive element in the landscape and buffers traffic noise. It also provides a visual and physical armature at the intersection of the only two streets that bound the site, effectively discouraging casual—or purposeful—entry. The protection is completed by the sculptural proscenium just around the corner, the most prominent feature of the park. Even at the most acute corner of the plaza, the point at which the wedge of land begins to open away from a downtown intersection, artist Robert Maki's blocklike sculptures reinforce the boundaries. Inside, the grid of honey locust trees, benches, and planters that soften the landscape only reinforce the confusing impression that the park is a generously sized but private development open to the public. The retail storefronts cutting diagonally across the block at the inside edge of the park seem to own the space.

But even as WTO week roiled downtown, designers and city officials were meeting to begin the planning process for a new project nine blocks to the south. Along with the new city hall, the city has managed to garner a full block of open space. Working with landscape architect Barbara Swift, artist Beliz Brother, and the architects of the city hall, landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson is at work on a design concept. The block has a dramatic grade change, a transit station, and the advantage of being designed at the same time as a very compatible public building. Crowds—even angry ones—are once again part of the program. Seattle may have another chance to get it right.

LA

Clair Enlow is an architecture critic and columnist for the Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce.

## RESOURCES

### TECHNOLOGY

See "Rainwater Harvesting" on page 40.

American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association, P.O. Box 80681, Austin, TX 78708-0681.

American Water Works Association, 6666 West Quincy Avenue, Denver, CO 80235; 303-794-7711; fax 303-794-7310.

Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems, 8604 F.M. 969, Austin, TX 78724; 512-928-4786; fax 512-926-4418.

Dr. Dennis Lye, Department of Biological Sciences, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY 41099; 513-569-7870.

Charles Gibson, Rain Man Waterworks, P.O. Box 972, Dripping Springs, TX 78620; 512-858-7020.

Harley Rose, Rainwater Collection Over Texas, 201 Thurman Road, San Marcos, TX 78666; 512-353-4949.

*Rainwater Collection for the Mechanically Challenged*, by Suzy Banks. Tank Town Publishing, 1997.

*Texas Guide to Rainwater Harvesting*. Texas Water Conservation Development Board. Attention: Patty Waters, P.O. Box 13231, Austin, TX 78711-3231.

### ECOLOGY

See "Stormwater Ponds" on page 48.

Daily, Gretchen. "Introduction: What are Ecosystem Services?" In: *Nature's Services: Societal Dependence on Natural Environments*. G. C. Daily, ed. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997.

Ferguson, Bruce K. *Introduction to Stormwater: Concept, Purpose, Design*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998.

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King County, Washington, *Surface Water Design Manual*. King County Department of Natural Resources, 1998.

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*Watershed Protection Techniques*, a journal published by the Center for Watershed Protection, [www.pipeline.com/~mrrunoff/main.htm](http://www.pipeline.com/~mrrunoff/main.htm), or [www.cwp.org](http://www.cwp.org).

### CHINESE SCHOLAR'S GARDEN

See "Interpreting Tradition" on page 62.

The journal *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* has recently published two issues devoted to Chinese gardens, the second of which contains a translation of Qi Biao's "Footnotes to Allegory Mountain," quoted in this article. Refer to vol. 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1998) and vol. 19, nos. 3 and 4 (July-December 1999), all edited by Stanislaus Fung. Copies are available from Taylor & Francis Ltd., 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE, [www.tandf.co.uk](http://www.tandf.co.uk).

The garden historian Craig Clunas has recently written a treatise on Ming Dynasty gardens titled *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China*. Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1996.

The classic of Chinese garden design is *Yuan Yeh*, written by Ji Cheng in 1634. It has been translated as *The Craft of Gardens*, by Alison Hardie, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1988.

For a good overview of Chinese history, refer to *A History of Chinese Civilization*, by Jacques Gernet, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1982.

### SHARED WISDOM

See "Eyes on the Future" on page 138.

Hulse, D., 1995. "Of Science, Salmon, and Sprawl: Landscape Planning in the Pacific Northwest." *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (April), pp. 56-60.

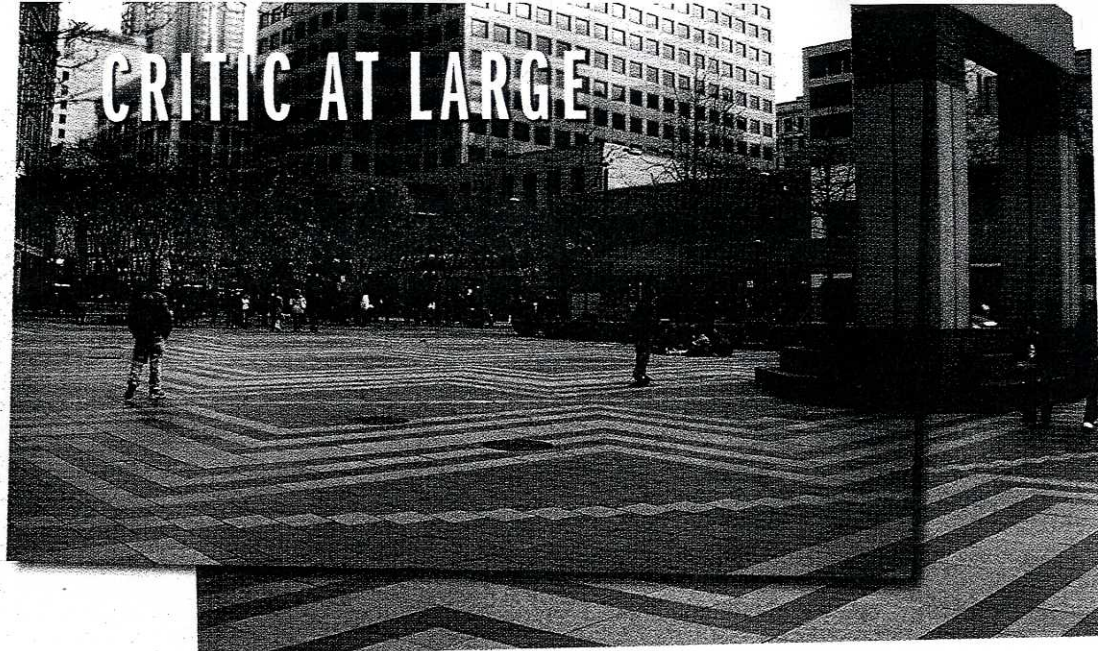
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Pacific Northwest Ecosystem Research Consortium, [www.orst.edu/dept/pnw-ercl](http://www.orst.edu/dept/pnw-ercl).

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How discernible is the intricate paving pattern designed for Westlake Plaza from eye level? What is more obvious is the large, stiff space.

The place had an authentic urban feel to it, not unlike the funky and messy, but ultimately pleasing, ambience found under the Chicago El.

**B**Y 1980, DOWNTOWN was showing signs of reinvigoration. The original, and still flagship, Nordstrom store was committed to remaining as a solid anchor. The state of Washington was building a new convention center. And the renovation and restoration of the multiblock Pike Place Public Market had just been completed a few years before.

The city wanted to make an impact with a big splashy project at Westlake, right in the center of downtown. The Seattle Art Museum was looking for a new downtown home, and on the national scene, "festival marketplaces" built by the Rouse Corporation were the hot thing in urban development.

The city's notion was to use its urban renewal authority to knock down a half-dozen structures to clear the site and then sell it back to the private sector at a drastically reduced price in return for a shopping complex topped by the art museum. Trouble was, this scheme ran afoul of state laws that required a clear public benefit. After years of legal wrangling, the project was scrapped. But the city was still determined to make something big happen there. Most of the assembled land was sold to the Rouse Corporation for an office building and a multistory shopping center. The city sought designs for a park on the remaining, triangular-shaped parcel.

Enter landscape architects Hanna/Olin of Philadelphia, who were selected for the work in the early 1980s. Their design not only addressed the park space but also called for folding in the adjoining streets and intersections. Sidewalks and street surfaces would be covered with granite pavers with a zigzag pattern resembling the characteristic weave of baskets by the Salish Tribe of the Pacific Northwest.

The plaza would also have a waterfall that one could walk through, lots of seating, and large-scale public art. But it was the paving pattern that caught the imagination of public officials. Here was the "big idea" they had been looking for. Plus, the park would seem even larger with the adjacent streets treated in a similar fashion.

During the same period, Metro, the regional transit agency, was constructing a transit tunnel under Pine Street. This offered an added rationale for digging up the street and repaving it: The "roof" of the tunnel would essentially

(Continued on Page 158)

## WASTED WEAVE

Paving patterns aren't enough to make Seattle's Westlake Park a vital urban space. **By Mark Hinshaw**

**W**HEN A LANDSCAPE architect is commissioned to redesign a public space, is the result always an improvement? Sure, the redesign may be cleaner, more organized, and better composed, but is it a better social space? Or do gritty urban landscapes have their own charm that's lost when designers are brought in to "improve" them?

Case in point: Twenty-five years ago, downtown Seattle was far from the robust commercial center it is now. Department stores were closing down or leaving for the suburbs. Locally owned shops were barely hanging on. The last vestiges of the rough-and-tumble navy town were still in evidence with many blocks lined with sleazy taverns, pawn shops, strip joints, and X-rated bookstores. A handful of decrepit movie theaters were the only nonseamy nightlife available.

But there was one bright spot downtown—Westlake, a confluence of streets and open areas that swirled about Pine Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues. The monorail, originally built for the 1962 World's Fair, had an aerial station at this location. At the street level, fruit vendors lined the sidewalk. A tiny cart called Monorail Espresso was the first outdoor espresso stand in the city, perhaps in the country.

Richard Peterson, a well-known street musician, greeted people leaving the monorail station while shaking a can of coins between his feet to the rhythm of his off-key horn playing. A cozy Danish bakery offered a splendid array of pastries from its second floor location. And around the corner, an underground nightclub with all-white interior décor beckoned folks to nocturnal entertainment.



## CRITIC AT LARGE

(Continued from Page 160) support the pavers. When all was finished, the downtown would have a sparkling urban plaza flanked by a new shopping complex with a first-class transit station underneath it all.

**B**UT WHAT EXACTLY did the city get? Today, Westlake Park is used mainly by out-of-towners. Few locals—save for indigents and street kids—find it a commodious place to spend time. The shopping center is not much different from scores of generic structures found in cities and suburbs across the country. The park is home to the annual Christmas Carousel, and it occasionally sees a protest or two during the rest of the year. But, for most Seattle residents, the place holds little appeal.

Gone are the locally owned shops, cafés, and nightspots. Monorail Espresso was given the boot. And Richard Peterson plays his horn there no more.

Westlake Park seems too tidy, more than a tad suburban, and simply overdesigned. Just too much is going on in such a small place. There is a large fountain. There is a stage. There is an obligatory big piece of public art. Benches are laid out in a stiff, geometric pattern. The Starbucks outlet that anchors one corner almost seems like a cliché. (To be fair, the designers had

nothing to do with the selection of espresso vendors.)

And what about the weave of granite pavers, the “big idea” that caused such excitement?

Well, virtually all photos of the place show it as seen from several stories up—the only vantage point where the pattern is clearly visible. From eye level, the pattern is simply not discernible. And even if the basket-weave pattern were more obvious, decades of street grime have dulled its appearance.

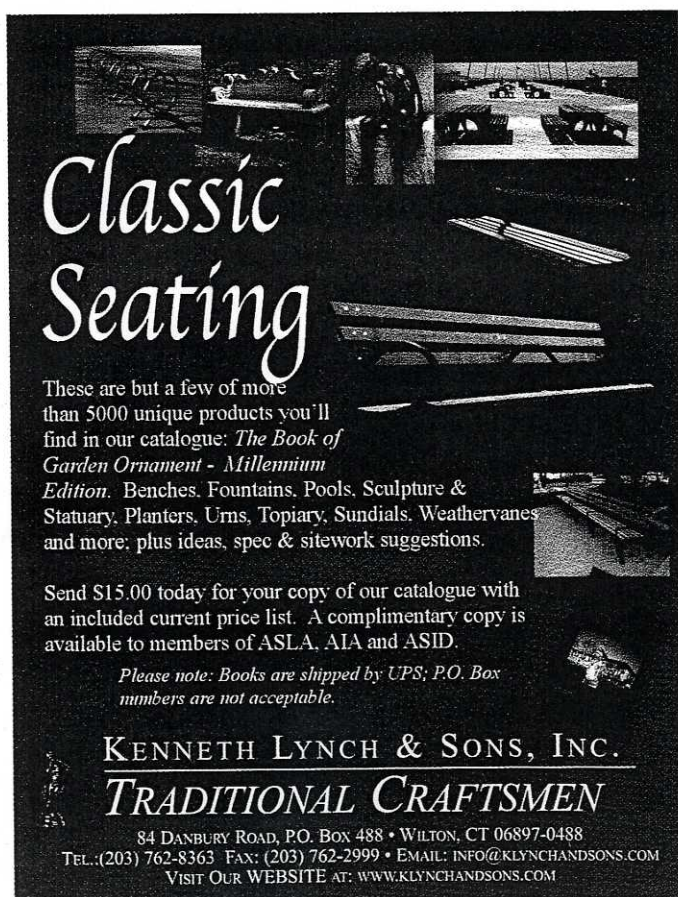
In fairness, the full scope envisioned by the designers was never implemented.

City engineers did not allow the granite to be used on Fourth Avenue, the main adjacent street, except for its intersection, because they were concerned about heavy loads from trucks and buses. Only one short block of Pine Street was paved with granite.

Even so, Westlake Park has never acquired the status of a true “public living room” as have Union Square in San Francisco and Pioneer Square in Portland, both of which have events and celebrations almost every week. Westlake Park is perhaps a design with a misplaced “big idea”: that paving by itself would give the place a unique identity.

Westlake Park is not a failure. Certainly, people do use it. But it is simply not the endearing and energetic city square that Seattle deserved to have as the heart of its downtown. **LAM**

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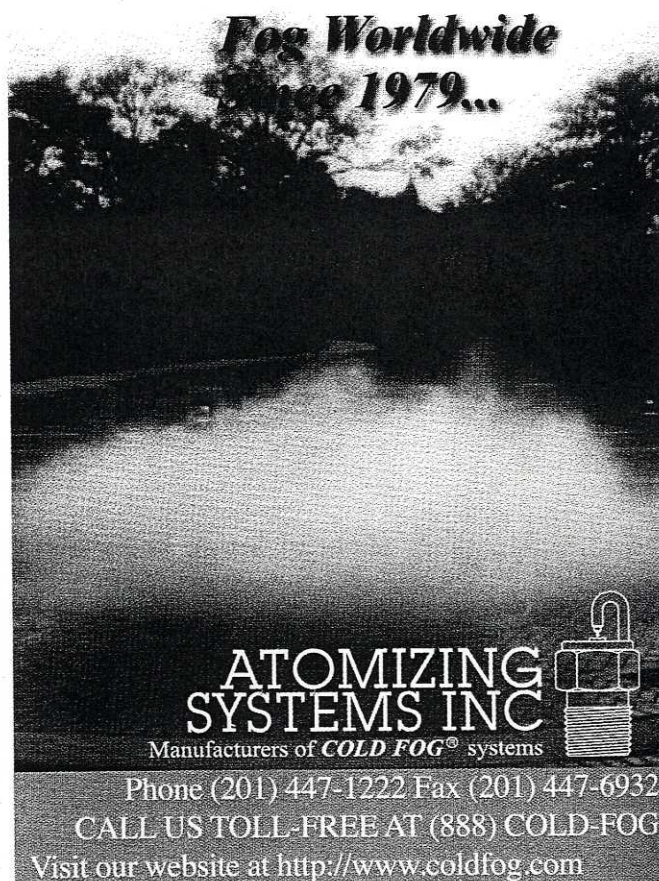
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