

## Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison: An Urban Discourse

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Newton Harrison: ...an aesthetic exists always in interaction with, and in commentary ofn, a larger social context ... to isolate an aesthetic and attempt to make it unrelated to other things is impossible."

Helen Mayer Harrison: To me, an Aztec ceremony where they propitiated the gods by cutting out the hearts of young girls might have been aesthetically pleasing, providing of course your own heart was not at stake and notions about the sanctity of life had not occurred to you. – interview with Michael Auping, *Common Ground: Five Artists in the Florida Landscape*

*Three Urban Statements: Baltimore, Atlanta, San Jose* by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, on display at the San Jose State University art Galleries, concerns urban practices comparable to the Aztec ritual so graphically commented on above by Helen. The Harrisons see, in these three cities, that the basic human activity of walking has been ignored, disrupted and even prevented entirely by major urban changes. They see imperialism, in the form of city planning, disrupting normal patters of human movement. In various ways, the three projects call attention to this problem. Two suggest that it is possible to restore natural walking patterns by establishing a dialog about the question within the city itself.

While the Harrisons are not the first to recognize problems with city planning ( Jane Jacobs historic book, *The Death and Life of American Cities* comes to mind, their method of calling attention to it, the way in which they interface that awareness with both the art world and the world of political decision making – their packaging of the idea, so to speak, - is the major creative endeavor of their current work. The issue of urban walking is connected for them to the larger issue of communication. Their central concern is the reestablishment of discourse. Maps, photographs and poetic statements displayed in galleries provide only bench marks for the larger dialog that the Harrisons wish to stimulate.

The *Baltimore Promenade* in the San Jose installation, contains only a fraction of its original photographic components, but it is the most complete statement of urban discourse of the three in the tshow. The artists' first fully realized urban landscape project, the *Promenade* developed during the winter of 1981-82. At the invitation of Fred Lazarus, President of the Maryland Institute and College of Art, the Harrisons examined urban planning proposals that related to the already enormously successful Baltimore Harbor project. The Harrisons proposed connecting the harbor project to the city's cultural center in one direction and to an already established park in another direction. They visualized this connection by simply pointing out that by means of the twenty minute promenades, people could move out of the self-contained nucleus of the harbor, surrounded by its eight-lane noose of highways, to the surrounding city. All that the artist suggested was a walk that made use of the city as it already existed – they simply drew a line on a map to mark the walk. The total cost to the city was that of moving one bridge and adding a stoplight, and the result was "Baltimore Promenade/A concept for making Baltimore walkable (again), a proposal inviting involvement and action/. . . /a promenade is both an activity and a place/a stage on which people in a community meet and mix./ It is a leisurely meeting and mixing having a different /purposiveness and tempo than daily activities in a workplace."

The neighborhood through which the two promenades passed had been considered unsafe or undesirable. The Harrisons catalyzed an official walk by the mayor, members of the city council and planning officials (who began to run for office with speeches along the way.) The local newspapers extensively covered the story and a renewed understanding of and interest in a much larger segment of downtown Baltimore was the result.

On display in San Jose are aerial photographs of the promenade marked with highlighted pens to locate the promenade route, as well as maps and evocative poetic statements about the harbor and its history in the city. Most striking visually are the line-of-sight photographs taken from one building to another, or from an airplane flown at a particular angle and altitude to show the promenade. The photographs are set at oblique angles on the walls and are cut to call attention to particular buildings. The visual components of the Baltimore statement hang elegantly in the gallery. Yet, these fragments, visually pleasing as they are individually, exist inseparably from the larger history of the project, reaching backward to the Harrison's connection to the art community and forward to the communication between the Harrisons and the urban community at large.

The Harrisons call their activity "metaphorical planning." They question a city's need to spend millions of dollars to build an aerial walkway between parking lots or to design an urban environment when the city itself, in its ethnic and visual diversity of sounds, smells and activities can provide a fascinating experience for its inhabitants. What is necessary, according to the Harrisons, is not design, but the reawakening of our awareness of the immediate environment as it already exists, a restimulation of that basic human activity of moving on foot through time and space.

The use of poetic metaphor, both written on the walls of galleries and recited by the artists in performance, enables them to avoid pedantry and didactics in making their statements. Poetry permits them to break through the compartmentalized professionalism of our society, particularly the professionalism of language that disrupts communication. The Harrisons speak with city planners, politicians, ecologists, scientists and artists through poetry. They speak, and more important, they are heard – stimulating response and discourse.

*Fortress Atlanta* the second statement at San Jose, comments on the absence of urban communication in Atlanta. Invited to create a piece for the Human Rights Conference, the Harrisons chose to comment on a situation, rather than catalyze solutions. As seen in the gallery, *Fortress Atlanta* like the *Baltimore Promenade*, utilizes maps, photographs and words to highlight a condition – in this case a city center that looks like a medieval fortress. The downtown renewal of Atlanta – with its huge office buildings, limited access, blank walls and hurricane fences topped with barbed wire – exists isolated from its surrounding neighborhoods. The Harrisons write of Atlanta: "A city of Towers/Defendable entry by entry/Building by Building/Street by Street/We are assured some people live here." The statement like its topic did not reach into the city as a performance or dialog. It stood as a statement, according to Helen, "about how architecture interferes with human rights." The project comments on a city with its heart transplanted, but one in which the operation neglected to provide the necessary small veins and arteries that would reconnect the heart to the body of the city.

The third statement in the exhibition focuses on San Jose itself. Titled *Guadalupe Meander: A Refugio for San Jose*, this project is currently in process, in terms of political activities within the city. The documentation of the total project will be displayed in July at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

The Harrisons came to San Jose at the invitation of Michael Crane, at that time the university art gallery director. While visiting the city, the artists almost accidentally came upon the idea of a project devoted to the Guadalupe River. As they were driving through the city, they noticed an unusual number of bridges. Stopping, they discovered birds nesting next to a virtually undisturbed river. The Guadalupe Project began by simply calling attention to the need to incorporate the river into plans for the downtown area. They wrote; "TO the Mayor and the City Council. Can it be that you have forgotten your river? There appears to be no comment on it in your city plan for the downtown. This river, the Guadalupe River, which meanders neglected by the outskirts of your city center, almost forgotten, pursued by development on all sides, overgrown, polluted, dammed at its headwater, this river interests us. "

The Harrisons proposed somewhat more active operations than in the Baltimore Promenade. They suggested dredging, rebuilding bridges to allow access and restoring native plants as well as creating a meandering path. The result would be what Newton called a "green spine" for San Jose. They concluded their proposals. "Let the river be continuous, let the river bottom be continuous, let the riverbank be continuous. Where the box is needed for flood control, let it be external to the natural channel for the river. Let the river be continuous and the bottom and the banks. "

In the current showing of the Guadalupe Meander, there are aerial photographs, snapshots set on city maps, and writings, creating a three part story with a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning is the letter to the Mayor; the middle is a late sixties plan to landscape the river; and the end, their own proposal. But that is not the end of course; it is only the beginning of the process for which the Harrisons are currently the catalysts – the means of dialog between the various citizens and officials of the city.

They call the project a "refugia"

A refugia is a place that is crucial to certain wildlife, a place of retreat in the midst of an alien environment. . The Harrisons suggested two analogies for the San Jose refugia; a hedgerow along a British field where rabbits and rodents take shelter away from open fields, and a buffalo wallow, where fish crucial to the control of malaria mosquitos dwell. The San Jose refugio , hence, provides needed protections and nourishment; it provides contact with water, trees, and earth and the possibility of slow movement on foot. Since this project advocates walking in nature and the Baltimore Promenade proposed walking in the city, the two projects are partners in calling for pedestrian movement. Both contrast with the Fortress Atlanta, a place of no pedestrian travel, no connection and hence no communication.

The Harrisons current work with the urban environment extends naturally from their work with ecology and particularly from their examination of the social behavior of shrimp. As the Harrisons engage the systems of nature and connect their models to the world of art and politics, they point out the metaphorical parallels of the different systems. They seek to reestablish normal patterns. They come to a location , engage it on its own terms, uncover an imbalance and offer a new perspective that can restore a balance, a natural connection.

In the three Urban Statements, the Harrisons are saying that walking is a right that needs to be reclaimed, a normal human activity that is often forgotten in the artificial environment of planned urban America. Their new work fundamentally challenges our technological society through its simplicity of statement and process, its focus on human scale, and most of all, its discursive process. Can it be that

such a simple act as taking a walk has become a radical idea? Apparently so.