

The Dallas Waterworks

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Dan Kiley's reputation as the doyen of American landscape architects is little known outside of tightly knit academic and corporate circles. Working with a small staff in a Thoreauesque setting in the hills of Vermont, Kiley has produced an oeuvre of built landscapes that has defined and challenged the interpretation of the modern movement in his discipline. Kiley has railed against the educational theories, professional associations, and practices of his colleagues in the field broadly defined as landscape architecture, while producing built works of exceptional clarity, skill, and expressiveness. Neither an environmental determinist, a participatory realist, nor a romantic idealist, Kiley is perhaps best positioned within the design tradition into which he first emerged as a designer, that of high modernism. Kiley has described the designer's work as being to "project the ideal solution; i.e., the highest possibility for the place, then modify this ideal projection only as necessary for a realistic solution."¹

In an only partially complete plaza on the edge of the area of downtown Dallas known as the Arts District, the wealth of Kiley's contribution to the possibilities for contemporary urban space is powerfully evident. Conceived in a purity of idea rare by today's standards, Fountain Place combines the design expertise of I. M. Pei, Harry Cobb, Harry Weese, and Kiley. Upon visiting the vacant site, which is situated at the base of what was built as the Allied Bank Tower for Criswell Development Corporation, Kiley is reported to have conceived the plaza as a bold reaction to all that he felt the space was *not*. He felt that shade and water were needed in a profusion equal to the blinding white heat that seems to envelop Dallas's downtown core during Texas summers.² Kiley's response was not so much a site analysis as it was a simple, intuitive objection to the vacuousness of the proposed building site. As the building now invents itself against the backdrop of the Dallas skyline, the plaza was to be a manmade invention on the ground – a garden, therefore, in the word's truest sense, that of human artifact.

The sea green tower rises from the ground on glass-clad *piloti* that allow the structure to all but disappear at street level, in marked contrast to the signature of its "Texas ski slope" upper floors. This scheme creates a wonderful aberration to the tired cliché of the "tower in the park" that haunts architectural practice. Fountain Place resists the serenity and leisure of a green and parklike space, offering instead an incessantly active and sensuous environment that engulfs the visitor as completely as it does the base of the tower.



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The sensuality of the scheme cannot be dismissed; rigid geometry, exaggerated water displays, exacting craft, and technical illusion have transformed the space into an Eden of surreal intensity. Mocking its locale, its climate, its poverty of context, the plaza solicits pleasure seekers with a geometric rhyme of seductive measure.

In *The Poetics of Gardens*, Charles Moore and his fellow authors place gardens defined by a rigid internal symmetry in a typological unit identified as "patterns" and comment, "We are fascinated not by the simple and quickly grasped rules that govern them, but by the endlessly varied and thrilling games that the rules make possible."³ While Fountain Place does not conform to the absolute bilateral symmetry of the classical gardens Moore uses to illustrate that typology, it is nonetheless a spectacular example of such a creation. The visitor is seductively brought into the space and time of the garden, a masterfully patterned network of trees, fountains, and stepped walkways in which the ordinary urban reality of downtown Dallas is displaced and set aside for the moment.

Unlike the private precincts that ground the typical Dallas tower, Fountain Place is not ignored or dismissed as belonging to the few entering the structure. It has assumed a life of its own, and, unlike most speculative landscapes, it is sought out as a destination, a place of comfort, a sight to see. Its prominence could be explained away as the mere product of the wonder of hundreds of fountains located within a grove of hundreds of trees in an urban core, but this fails to explain its fascination, the sensuousness of being within it. The purity of the conception within Kiley's own account is the key to a critique of the work.

By envisioning the scheme in its entirety – two nearly identical towers with a third structure as backdrop – it is possible to reconstruct the ground upon which the plaza evolved into an aesthetic garden, a tour de force of sensuous knowing. Kiley's initial abstraction of the site into a pure composition, a perfect model that has itself as its own defining mechanism, recalls the



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Dan Kiley, landscape architect, Fountain Place, Dallas, 1987.

luxurious self-centeredness of early Italian gardens without any of the demands for theological apologies. Fountains by the hundred (more than 400 in the original scheme) offered not only an alternative sound and scene but literally an alternative climate to the visitor. The existing slope of the site, not unlike that at the Villa d'Este at Tivoli being contrary to the design intent, was forced into complicity through time-honored devices: waterfalls, viewing platforms, and flights of steps create a kind of geometric ground for the aesthetic vision of the space. Geoffrey Jellicoe, designer of the Moody Gardens, under way on Galveston Island, wrote of the Italian Renaissance garden, "No longer in any way symbolic, the garden became a setting for pleasure and philosophical debate."⁴ And so also is Kiley's garden no longer symbolic, but rather an intensely sensuous experience, and if not the site of philosophical speculation, it is undeniably a place of solace and contemplative musing.

Providing evidence of the power of its abstraction – the idea of the garden – is its success in its present, only partially completed state. Rather than offering a hint of what could have been, the plaza weaves a spell that rivals that of mature and vast gardens. Again, an abstraction of

the built scheme offers insights for the critique of such a claim for space. The space is predominantly liquid, but not with calm pools of water or discreet fountains in their containers; it is no less than a benign explosion of water contained within a heroic grove of cypress trees, which anchor and protect the play of the water spirits. Meticulously crafted weirs agitate the water's fall from level to level, and when the garden is illuminated at night they intensify the experience in both sight and sound.

Fountain Place, like its designer, breaks the rules, rails against the dictums of urbanism, and in doing so furthers the bounds of the urban landscape aesthetic. It does not attract enough people to satisfy the criteria that Holly Whyte set out in his influential *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*,⁵ yet it is always in use. It hides the building, as the architect feared, but makes the structure all the more powerful by doing so. It requires a level of maintenance at odds with every standard of speculative practice. Visited as a destination in itself, it offers a modernist garden that is without apology and in need of no rationale. It is its own statement, a creation of itself. This garden defines the modernist aesthetic in much the same way that its tower proclaims the power of abstraction over the

postmodern babble of later structures laying claim to the skyline of Dallas.

Designed and built during the heady days of the Texas boom, Fountain Place is a testament to the potential of aesthetic modernism and a statement of its limitations. It bears the mark of genius in its intuitive brilliance and in its meticulously crafted yet extravagantly bestowed resources. Like so many aesthetic creations that come to assume a pivotal place within the historical construction of any period of design and art, Fountain Place is both a definitive work within its genre and a summation of the ideas and methods that initiated and nurtured it. Conceived of as a kind of abstract purity (more a reaction than a response to the site), the garden delights the visitor and offers a suspension of context, taking the viewer into a sumptuous creation of space and time apart from all that surrounds the garden. Obviously and intensely manmade, yet offering the finest of nature's respites in the shade of tall trees and the sound of moving water, the plaza becomes a garden, perhaps the best habitat for the human species.

The essayist Michael Pollan wrote in his allegorical work on gardening, *Second Nature*, that much of what is polemically cited as "ecological" in contemporary literature is really no more than "another instance of moralism's triumph over aesthetics in the American garden." He offers an alternative view of the garden: an intensely cultural, built creation that engages the imagination and the senses and provides "a passage somewhere else – to the personal and shared past its scents evoke, to the distant places to which its forms allude." Pollan envisions gardens as existing both "here" and "there." Those that are all "here" end up being "slack, insipid, indistinct from the surrounding landscape"; whereas gardens that are all "there" may be "cold or abstract," offering no connection to the user. Kiley's garden in downtown Dallas is both "here" and "there." It is both a real place and an imaginary place, a thing apart. As Michael Pollan might say, Fountain Place is "a trope; a trope that gives real shade."⁶ ■

1 Katsuhiko Ichinowatari, *Landscape Design: Works of Dan Kiley*, *Process Architecture* no. 33 (Tokyo, 1982), p. 18.

2 Joel Warren Barna, "Two Dallas Towers," *Texas Architect*, July-August 1987, p. 43.

3 Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell, and William Turnbull, Jr., *The Poetics of Gardens* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 158.

4 Geoffrey Jellicoe and Susan Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 156.

5 Washington, D.C.: Conservation Foundation, 1980.

6 Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991), pp. 232, 243–44.

An Interview With C. C. Pat Fleming

ANNE SCHLUMBERGER BOHNN,
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STEPHEN FOX



C. C. PAT FLEMING is the dean of Texas landscape architects. In practice in Houston since 1937, he has been instrumental in formulating a set of gardening conventions that Mac Griswold and Eleanor Weller perceptively characterized when they wrote in *The Golden Age of American Gardens*: "Today, broadleaf evergreen gardens in a woodland setting seem uninventive, but in the twenties and thirties they were something new in Texas. Just like white columns, camellias and azaleas stood for Southern conservatism, for the antebellum Southern tradition revived and revised to fit the large suburban estate lot."¹

Fleming belongs to the generation of landscape architects who established the profession in Texas. As Sadie Gwin Blackburn documents in her essay "The Evolution of the Houston Landscape" in *Houston's Forgotten Heritage*, professional landscape gardeners were active in Houston by the 1840s, and landscape architects unsuccessfully attempted to maintain practices in Houston beginning in the 1910s. But prior to the early 1930s, it was Houston nurserymen, such as Edward Teas, who dominated residential landscape installation.² The archives of the landscape architects and city planners Hare & Hare, best known for their public planning commissions in Texas, contain a large collection of drawings of private garden designs for local clients, suggesting the void this Kansas City–based firm was called on to fill in Houston in the 1920s.³

Estelle B. Sharp, widow of the oil tool manufacturer Walter B. Sharp, responded to this condition by turning her estate on Main Street into the Houston Studio Gardens and setting the young landscape architect Ruth London up in practice in 1930.⁴ Miss London had the patronage of "all the garden club ladies," as Fleming's client and devoted friend, Alice E. Pratt,

recalls.⁵ But an enthusiasm for garden design seized Houston's elite in the 1930s that one landscape architect alone could not satisfy. Ellen B. Shipman of New York, now recognized as one of the outstanding American landscape architects of the 20th century, designed gardens in the mid-1930s for Mrs. Cleveland Sewall, Mr. and Mrs. John E. Green, and Mrs. Stephen P. Farish in River Oaks and for Mrs. Richard W. Neff in Broadacres. Several years after Pat Fleming and his partner, Albert E. Sheppard, opened their office in the River Oaks Center, Ralph Ellis Gunn came to Houston in 1940 to represent the Jungle Gardens nursery of Avery Island, Louisiana. Fleming, Miss London, Gunn, and J. Allen Myers, Jr., an instructor in landscape architecture at Texas A&M, were the founding members of the profession in Houston, as were their counterparts in Dallas, Joe Lambert of the Lambert Landscape Company and Marie and Arthur E. Berger.

A state as big as Texas provided rich opportunities for this generation, as a review of Pat Fleming's body of work makes clear. His early commissions – notably the Diana Garden at Bayou Bend for Ima Hogg and, next door, the Woodland Garden at Dogwoods for Mr. and Mrs. Mike Hogg – were primarily residential, although his earliest experiences after leaving architecture school at the University of Texas in 1930 were with public landscaping projects. He worked for the Austin landscape contractor Mrs. C. B. Whitehead in carrying out Hare & Hare's planting plan at the University of Texas, part of Paul Philippe Cret's reconstruction of the campus between 1930 and 1933. Between 1934 and 1935, as a junior-grade landscape architect, he designed Palmetto State Park near Gonzales, a Civilian Conservation Corps project, and between 1935 and 1936 he was supervising landscape architect at the San Jacinto Battlegrounds State Park.⁶ It was this final project that brought him to Houston.

Fleming & Sheppard were responsible for the gardens of many of the houses that John F. Staub designed in River Oaks, Shadyside, and Broadacres in the 1930s and early 1940s. Fleming's growing reputation brought him work in the affluent suburbs of other Texas cities. He designed estate gardens for Mr. and Mrs. J. Cooke Wilson in Beaumont, for Mr. and Mrs. Pio Crespi in Dallas, for Governor and Mrs. Allen Shivers in Austin, and for Mr. and Mrs. George Parker and Marion Koogler McNay in San Antonio. He was responsible for the grand gardens of Emma Louise Biedenharn in Monroe, Louisiana, and he carried out landscape work for General and Mrs. Kemper Williams, founders of the Historic New Orleans