

More Than a City Park

Vito Acconci's Proposal for Autry Park

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IN SPRING 1990, Susan and Roy O'Connor, founders and principal trustees of the Appleseed Foundation, presented a proposal for the development of Autry Park, city-owned land under the supervision of the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The unimproved, vacant site is located at the intersection of Allen Parkway and Shepherd Drive, adjacent to the Center for the Retarded. The Appleseed Foundation was founded to support programs that explore new and innovative ways of designing playgrounds, playground equipment, and other play spaces that are beneficial for the development of a child's physical capabilities and motor skills. At an afternoon gathering in their home attended by civic leaders and members of the Houston arts community, the O'Connors introduced Vito Acconci, a prominent artist from New York commissioned by Appleseed to prepare designs for the park. Using a scale model, Acconci presented his concept for a park that would challenge a child or adult to find new ways of moving through everyday space.

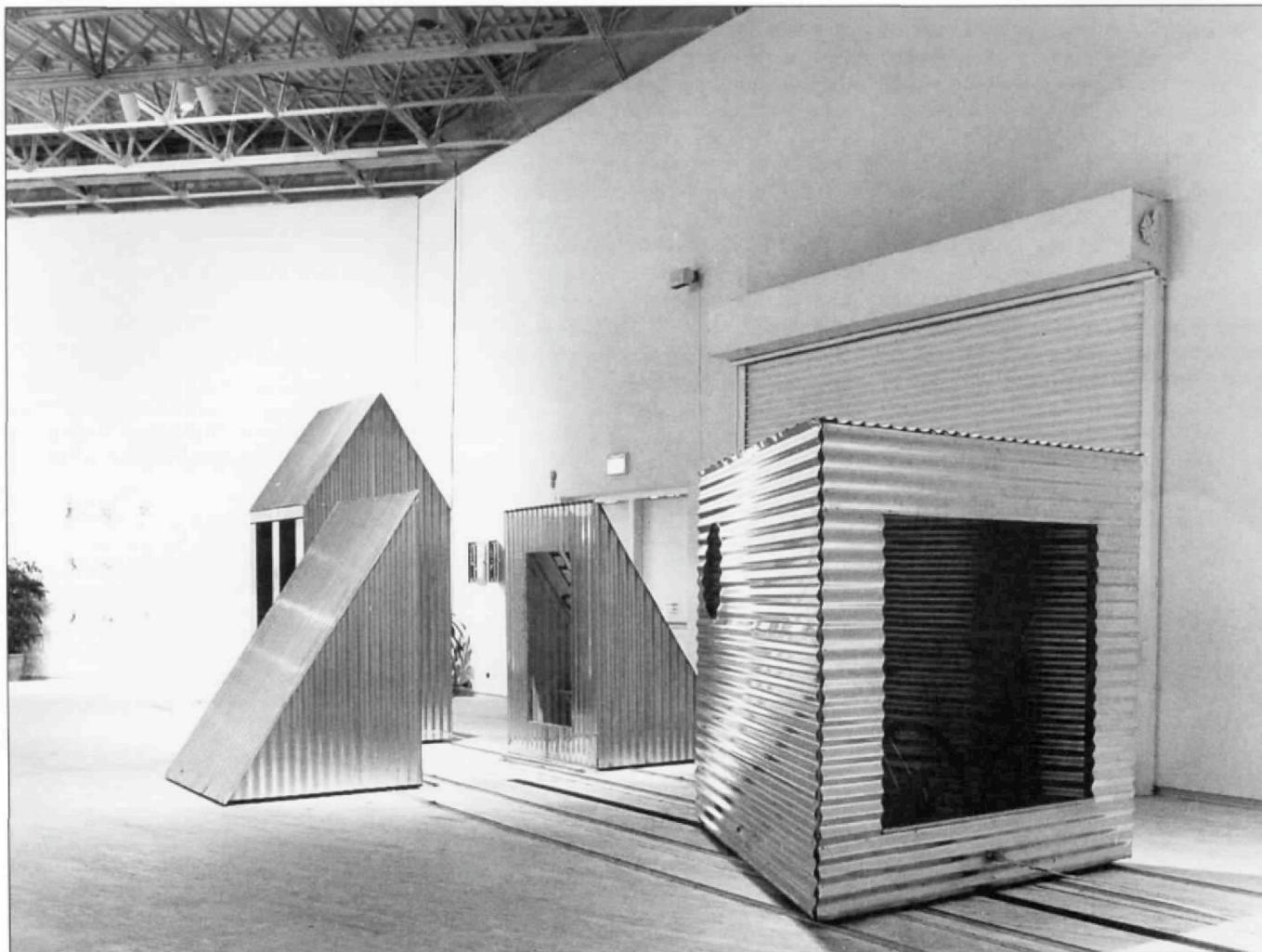
Unfortunately, his fascinating proposal was not to be realized. Even the generosity of the Appleseed Foundation and the imagination of the artist were not strong enough to overcome the skepticism of those organizations that claimed to have the greatest stake in the land of Autry Park. Yet Vito Acconci's proposal suggests a wider application, and, reviewing its specifics, one discovers an original approach to landscape design that could be applied at another time and to a different site somewhere else in Houston.

Although not well known in Houston, Vito Acconci is no stranger to the city. In 1981, he participated with five other artists in an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum called *Other Realities – Installations for Performance*, curated by Marti Mayo, now director of the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston. *Collision House*, Acconci's piece in the exhibition, is helpful in understanding his approach to art. At first glance *Collision House* might appear to be just another piece of large-

scale abstract sculpture. Yet a different side of the sculpture comes to life when the viewer becomes actively involved. *Collision House* begins as two separate, corrugated-metal-clad triangular shapes, one upright, the other on its side like a wedge of cheese. The two shapes are connected on a track. Inside the wedge is a bicycle; when the viewer pedals, the wedge moves toward the upright triangular piece. Simultaneously, the center section of the upright triangular piece moves forward until it appears as a small, archetypal house. The now revealed blue and gold interior of the "house" displays a black flag with cut-out letters bearing the inscription "NGGR, FLG. No. 1." As the advancing wedge moves fully into position between the two sides of the opened triangular section, the cyclist looks through two circular cutout windows to see a white interior with inscriptions in black text that read "BMB SHLTR. No. 1" on one side and "BMB SHLTR. No. 2" on the other. These inscriptions are purposely mysterious, the artist's means of communicating obscure and private thoughts.¹

Central to the experience of *Collision House*, and always an issue in Acconci's work, is the joining and separation of two worlds, one outside and the other inside. The layers of inside and outside are purposefully complex, their meaning unfolding as a serial experience. The position of the participant constantly changes, first from the outside to the bicycle inside the wedge, then pedaling the bicycle, which moves the wedge into position within the sectioned triangle revealing the latter's interior space, color, and message. The entire scenario may also be viewed by an independent audience looking onto a virtual performance by the lone bicycle pedaler. Had the park proposed by Acconci for Houston been realized, it might have provoked a similar set of experiences, particularly the sense of coming from without to within through a multitude of overlapping layers, shapes, and forms.

As an artist, Acconci develops his designs through a process quite different from that of a typical design professional. Unlike the determined methodology of an architect, landscape architect, or planner, Acconci approaches a given problem with greater ambiguity. For the design professional, the process most often starts with a rather detached inventory of existing and surrounding conditions, such as landscape, roadways, climate, and circulation patterns. From this inventory a certain logical solution or way of dealing with the particular site reveals itself. The process of designing Autry Park was different. To begin with, Acconci helped determine the site, making his selection not for its potential as a landscape design, but because of its possibilities for personal interaction. And although only two sites were seriously considered, he favored Autry Park because of its adjacency to the Center for the Retarded in particular, as well as the Lighthouse of Houston, the Houston School for Deaf Children, the Gulf Coast Easter Seal Society, and the Houston Junior Forum Recreation Center for Older Adults – institutions serving people who are marginalized within society because of their handicaps. He was also intrigued with the site because he saw the land as a leftover, rejected space between a highway, a parking lot, and a building and not attached to any of these, visually or functionally. It did not matter to Acconci (nor was he particularly aware) that Autry Park is situated at a prominent traffic intersection, made all the more visible because of its sloping terrain. It never seemed very important to Acconci that his



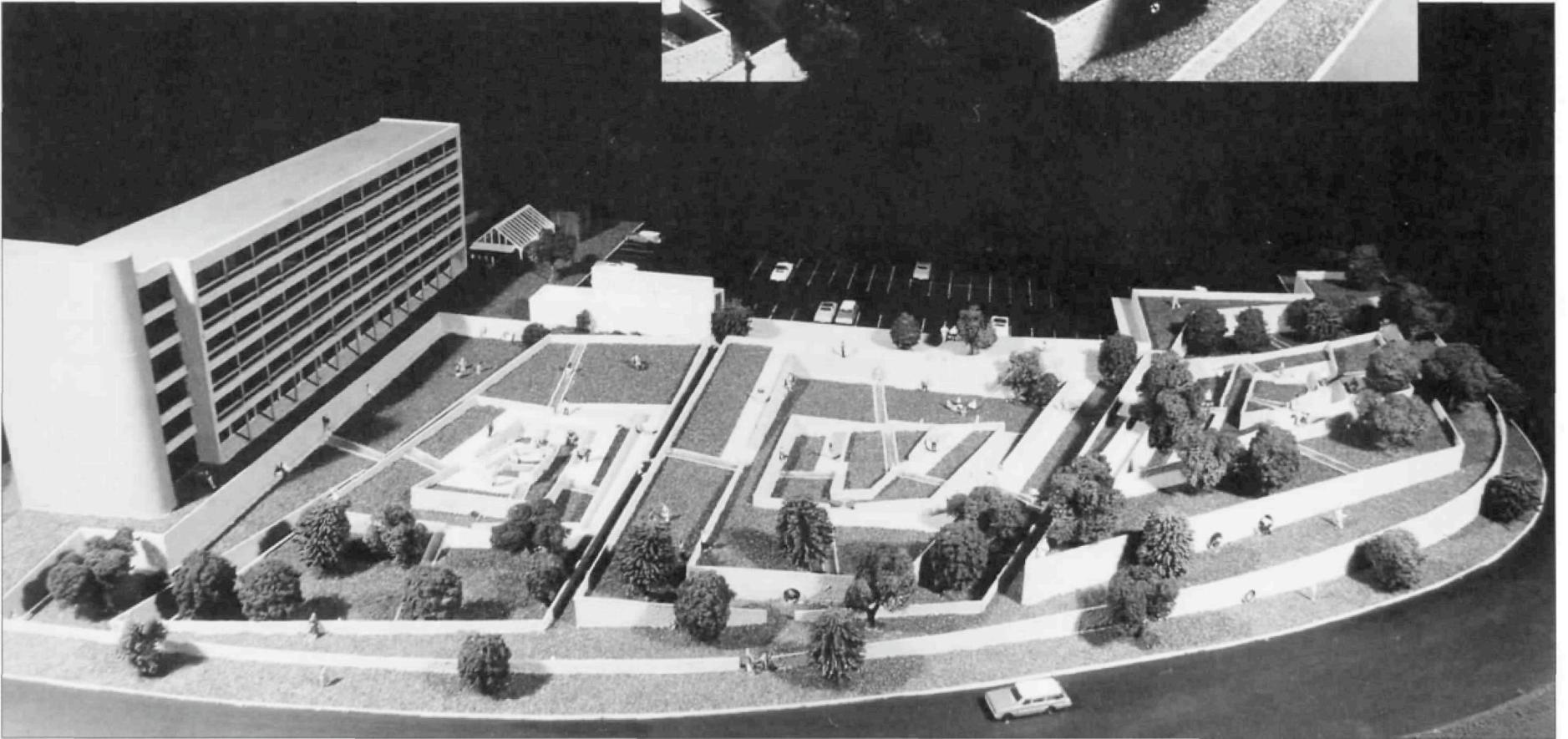
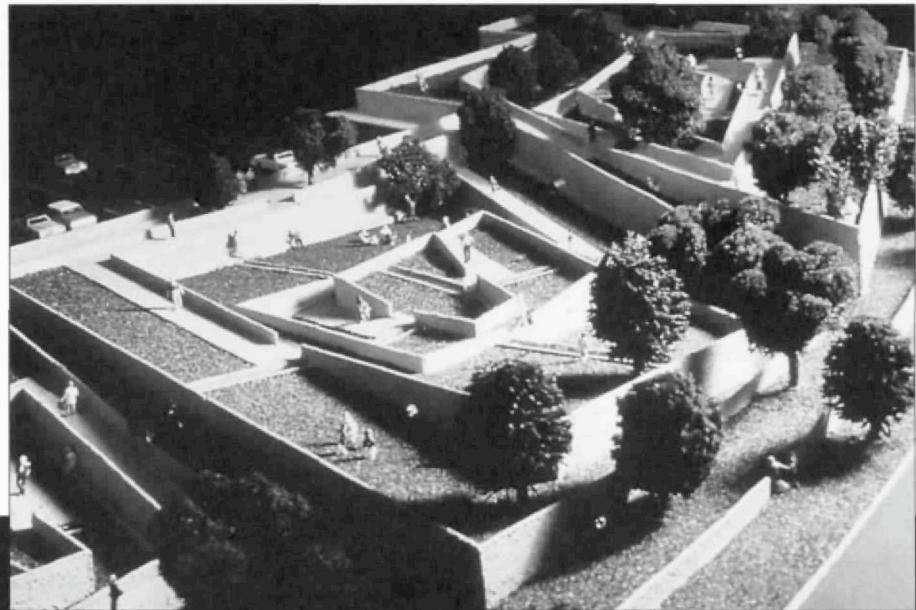
Collision House by New York artist Vito Acconci was part of a 1981 exhibition at Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, *Other Realities – Installations for Performance*.

David Crossley



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The empty Autry Park site as it appears today, with the Center for the Retarded in the background.



Vito Acconci's 1990 proposal for the development of Autry Park in Houston, at the intersection of Allen Parkway and Shepherd Drive. Inset: Detail of the model made in Acconci's studio.

proposed park would have a major visual impact at that intersection. Anything seen from passing cars would simply be an incidental byproduct of his design. He was far more concerned with the individuals from the adjoining institutions who would be using the park, or outsiders who might happen upon the park. From the beginning he intended a place that would be substantially internalized for the benefit of people with unconventional sensory perceptions. Essentially Acconci set out to undermine accepted and common order with another order that might stimulate an imaginative and exceptional response. He accepted the fact that an individual without sight or hearing, or one with stunted intellectual development, sees and perceives the world quite differently from the so-called normal. But while acknowledging these differences, Acconci never intended to make a place of exclusion.

Initially Acconci had contemplated a physical connection between the park and the dormitory of the Center for the Retarded via elevated pathways, but he rejected this in favor of a park that would exist fully within itself. In an interview he described the essence of the organization as "embedded" construction rather than an

"added to" system: making "space within a space, a space within that, a space within that," to a point within the practical limitations of increasingly smaller spaces.² To achieve this end, a pivoting three-dimensional labyrinth was formed by tilting the ground plane of the individual spaces and separating each of the resultant cells with concrete retaining walls. Rather than build on the ground, Acconci chose to build into the ground, by first building up and then shifting the ground inward through a series of tilting planes.

The entire oblong tract was to tilt along its natural slope so that half of the land would rise up toward Shepherd Drive and the other half fall toward Allen Parkway and the center's six-story dormitory building. The tract would then be subdivided by concrete walls lengthwise into three roughly trapezoidal pieces. Within these trapezoidal blocks, the ground would be further subdivided into increasingly smaller trapezoidal blocks, the ground plane of each tilting in the opposite direction, making a faceted surface of tilted planes. For the practical consideration of ambulatory or wheelchair movement, the angle of each plane was determined by the slope for a handicap

ramp. A concrete retaining wall was to surround the three largest sections, with entrances on both the parking lot side and Allen Parkway side that could be closed at night with security gates. Each of the three mazelike tables would thus be approached on either side of its pivoting axis. Inside the park there would be a series of walkways interrupted along their paths by three-foot-wide channels of water, two to three inches deep. The water channels would present an intentional obstacle to be crossed or circumnavigated. Benches would be formed of concrete strips projecting forward as the land fell gradually beneath. Round galvanized culvert pipes, like those used for drainage underneath highways, would be inserted into the concrete retaining walls. Some pipes would be covered with perforated metal, shielding walkway lights. Others would be left open and outfitted with seats for resting along the way or threaded from one side of the slope to the other, providing a tunnel to crawl or slide through.

Clearly Acconci intended to set a stage of intrigue that would unfold through individual discovery and exploration. The dilemma of how to move through the park was to be resolved through a series of

questions as in a game, such as: How shall I proceed? Shall I go up or down? Do I cross this little stream or follow it until another path joins my path? Where do I start and how do I end my journey? Shall I seek the shelter of an underground tunnel? Where the outside world is rationalized by clear and repeated systems of order, the experience of Acconci's park would have relied far more on an instinctual response as a guide along a benign yet mysterious pathway. Acconci's proposal presents a credible alternative model to an everyday order that can be both alienating and confusing to the outsider who, because of a physical or mental handicap, cannot easily cope with regulated order and its inherent rigidities. The order in Acconci's park would be found through natural instinct without the imposition of preexisting authority. Like the experience of *Collision House* at the Contemporary Arts Museum, the transformation would occur as the park was actively explored. The park would never possess the outward beauty of a conventional park; rather the sensation of beauty would necessarily come from within through the delicate sensations that occur while feeling one's way along.



Acconci's 1990 model for a bus shelter, now being built at the Longview School in Phoenix.

The requirements for Acconci's proposal for Autry Park had been carefully worked out with the O'Connors and the Applesseed Foundation in consultation with the staffs of the parks department and boards of the adjacent institutions. The director and board of the Center for the Retarded, the group with the greatest interest in the park, were more actively involved as the program for the park was refined. So when Acconci presented his model, there was initial acceptance and, indeed, enthusiasm for the unusual proposal. The parks department, happy to accept the generosity of a private foundation, went along. Unfortunately, the board of the Center for the Retarded had neglected to involve their parents' association in the programming and the meetings with Applesseed and Acconci. Members of the parents' association were apparently astounded when they viewed the model, fearing that the park would be a dangerous and disorienting place for their children. Their reaction was so damaging that Applesseed lost the support of the Center for the Retarded and the parks department. Further work on the proposal was tabled even though Acconci explicitly said

he was willing to address the concerns of the parent's association. Moreover, Acconci was never given the opportunity to broaden the concept of the initial scheme by addressing obvious technical issues or by introducing more specific elements of the natural landscape.

In retrospect, it is hard to say what went wrong. Even if the parents' association had been consulted at the beginning, they may never have been prepared to accept such a seemingly radical approach to the design for the "safe" playground they probably wanted. Perhaps Acconci's presentation model, in its attempt to simulate reality looking something like a model railroad set, would have been more convincing if it had been rendered abstractly, leaving more to the imagination. It is unfortunate that Acconci never had the chance to answer the challenges and objections to his scheme, but without the confidence and support of the center's board and the parks department, it would have been futile for Applesseed to pursue their proposal. Two years later, Autry Park remains as Acconci found it, an empty place between two highways, a parking lot, and a building.



Vito Acconci, *Face of the Earth*, 1984, wood and Astroturf.

Audience participation and interaction, always present in Vito Acconci's work, appeared in his design of public places in the 1980s, when the artist first made proposals specifically for parks and outdoor spaces. In an early proposal, a playground was to be composed of giant football and hockey masks, with swings and slides attached to the masks' frames. Another piece, *Face of the Earth* (1984), anticipated some of the ideas Acconci would pursue at Autry Park. First building up flat, Astroturf-covered wooden shelves, he then carved facial features out of the resulting mound. The piece was intended to be climbed and sat upon. Following a 1988 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of Acconci's proposals for public spaces, the artist received many new and even larger commissions for outdoor parks and spaces. Finally, some of these commissions are coming to fruition. In Phoenix, Arizona, construction will soon start on a bus shelter for a school. In the Bronx, New York, Acconci has worked with the building committee and architect of a new public elementary school designing the school's courtyard entrance. Here he proposes to fashion a series of geometrically arranged platforms that replicate and mirror, through the use of the same building materials—glass and brick—the facing walls that enclose the school's courtyard. In Europe, the city of Regensburg, Germany, has commissioned Acconci to design a park adjacent to a housing complex, and in 1993 the Museum for Applied Art in Vienna will open an installation specifically designed for the museum.

Acconci's design for Autry Park challenges the classical idea of a park as cultivated garden. Instead he suggests an approach that would stimulate and engage the senses both physically and intellectually, the precise goal the Applesseed Foundation sought to support. At their best, parks in cities provide relief and contrast to harsh urban conditions. Acconci's design for Autry Park would have accomplished this and much more. ■

1 Marti Mayo, *Other Realities – Installations for Performance* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1981), pp. 5–7.

2 Interview with Vito Acconci at his studio in Brooklyn, New York, June 1992.

Other Sources:

Ronald J. Onorato, *Vito Acconci: Domestic Trappings* (La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987).

Linda Shearer, *Vito Acconci: Public Places* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).

Three of Acconci's Adjustable Wall Bras, 1991, each made with plaster, steel reinforcing bars, canvas, steel cable, lights, and an audio component, are illustrated here in different positions. One version of the sculpture is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

