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Whiteface: A Pattern of Association

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Whiteface is a regionally communal swimming hole, somewhat Japanese in character, in the southern slope of New Hampshire's White Mountains.

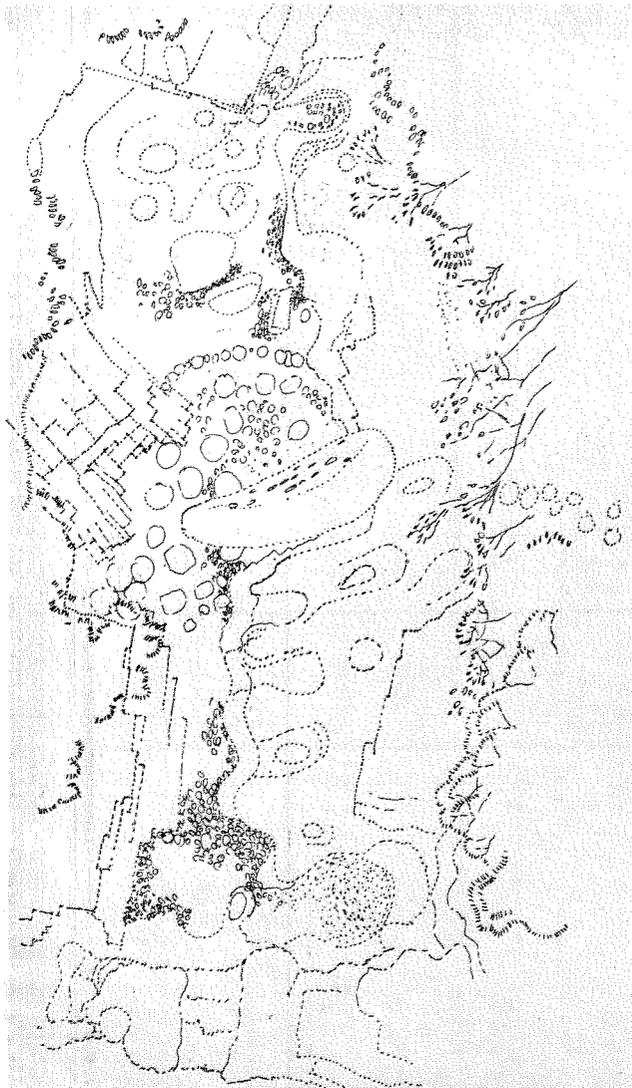
I had been seeking a reference for my urban design studio at MIT, a reference that showed my interest in the students taking an innovative look at the work. Several qualities were vying for position. It should be a wonderful communal place. Complexity, richness, and conflict were important elements. An ecological model would be ideal. I needed to love it. And I hoped the students would too.

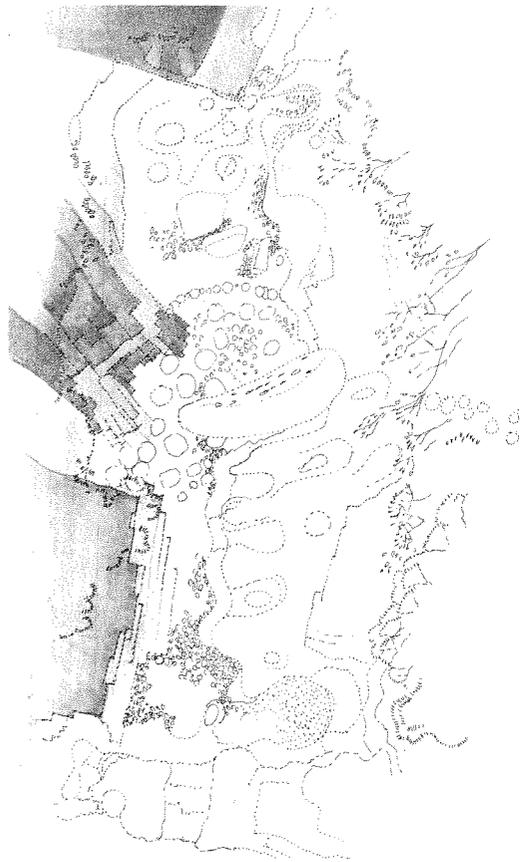
Almost unconsciously, Whiteface surfaced in the middle of an overlong committee meeting. Without much thought, I just started to draw it from memory on an 8½×-11-inch lined pad. Later I expanded the drawing by means of tape and three more pieces of 8½×-11-inch lined paper to 17 × 22 inches. But the decision to use Whiteface as the reference was made on the first drawing.

How to convey it? There were problems with the drawing's expressive, variably weighted line. I was moderately pleased with my memory of the shape of my subject, but how to get at all the partial aspects of its form in drawing? How to describe the great smooth ledges, the

clear water, the stones and pebbles, how people settled into the place along with stones, pebbles, and other people. I then made a "ghost" drawing by tracing the original completely with dotted lines. The emphasis was to come later and variably as needed. The ghost was then xeroxed on 17-×-22-inch vellum in many copies on which to explore.

At this point, I both got the flu and found my pastels. During the convalescence, which I stretched slightly to finish the study, there were periods of being awake, doing some trial renderings with the pastels, then sleeping, doing some dreaming. Each rendering became clearer in the dreaming part of the work. Fortunately, I was in the house alone with no telephone calls, no meetings, no interruptions on Western civilization's fifteen-minute interruption module. Whiteface began to lift out as a series of rendered separations, incorrectly at first, but then slowly becoming clearer. The accompanying studies are the result.





One could start with the water, whose clarity at first sight captures the mind. But that would not convey that here ledge lies under everything; it holds the water and all else on top of it: stones, pebbles, soil, lichen, moss, ants, shrubs, trees, people.

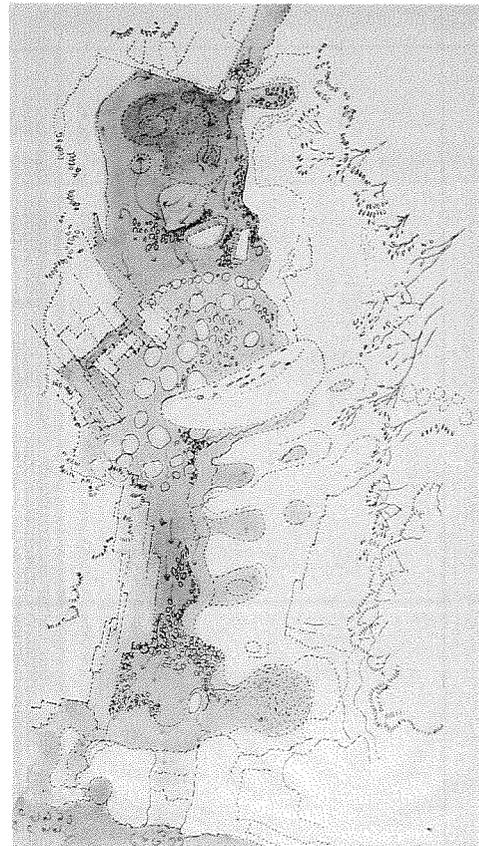
Standing barefoot on the warm, smooth surface of the ledge is like standing on a body like one's own. At a point, one realizes that this foot-contacted other body is the same one showing the face on Whiteface Mountain 1,500 feet above and a mile away. It is one continuous primal body, a fragment of its abdomen revealed here, cleared by occasional high water of all more recent material.

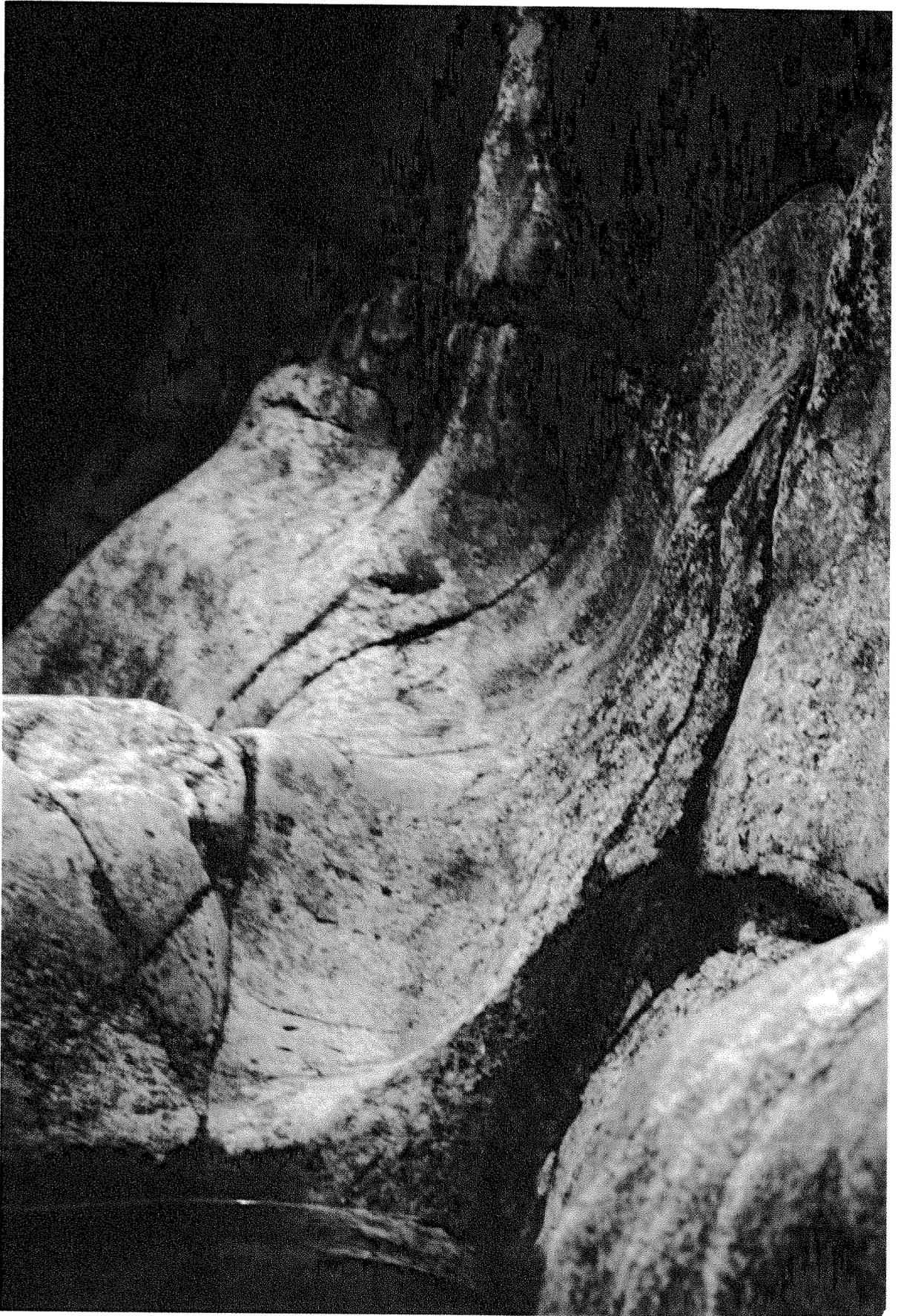


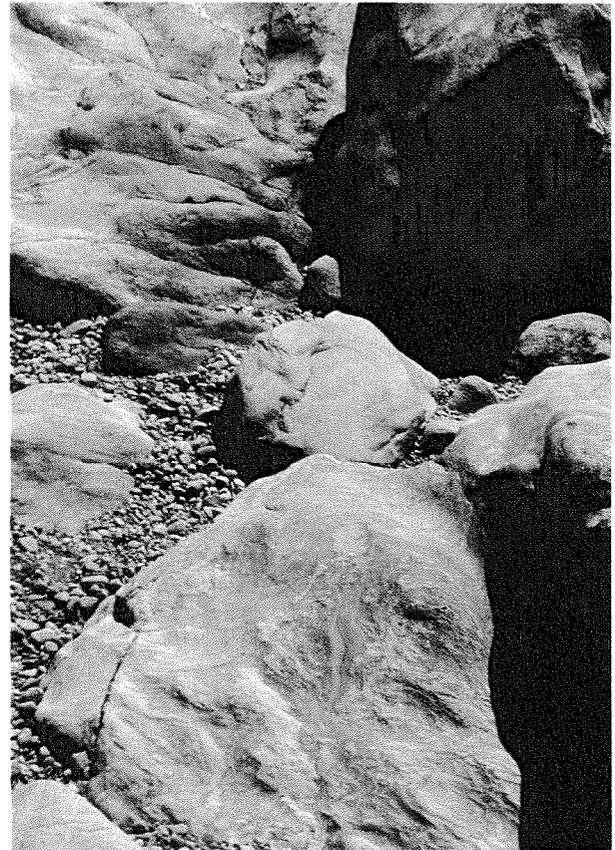
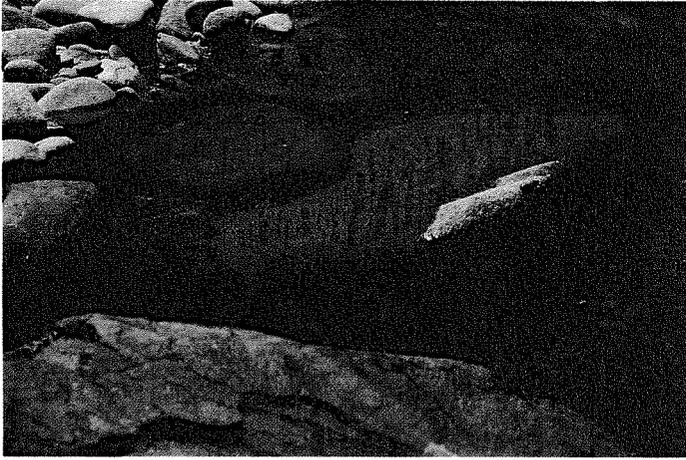
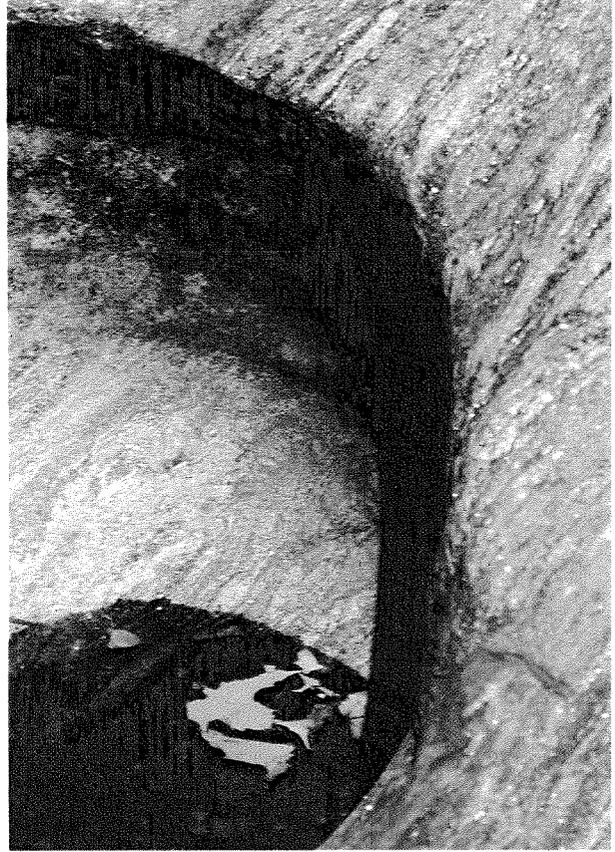
Sand, pebble, stone, rock, boulder journey by the water to lower levels at varying speeds. The big middle boulder has been here for some time. A new 15-cubic-foot rock has moved here for the first time in the fall floods. The sand in the lower cove will move out in the next high water, probably late fall, to be replaced by the next stony visitors.

Water, held in clean graphite hollows of ledge, outdoes every other element for purity. If you want to drink, bathe, and live in an original state of purity, this is the place to come. In the sunlit depths, the water is somewhat greenish. True it has to share some of the hollows with cousins—sand, pebbles, stones—but its tumbling, grinding, rounding trip down the streambed knocks everything off. They are clean. There is no moss on them. This water would do for baptisms, dedications, and ablutions and, of course, the everyday bathing common to Americans.

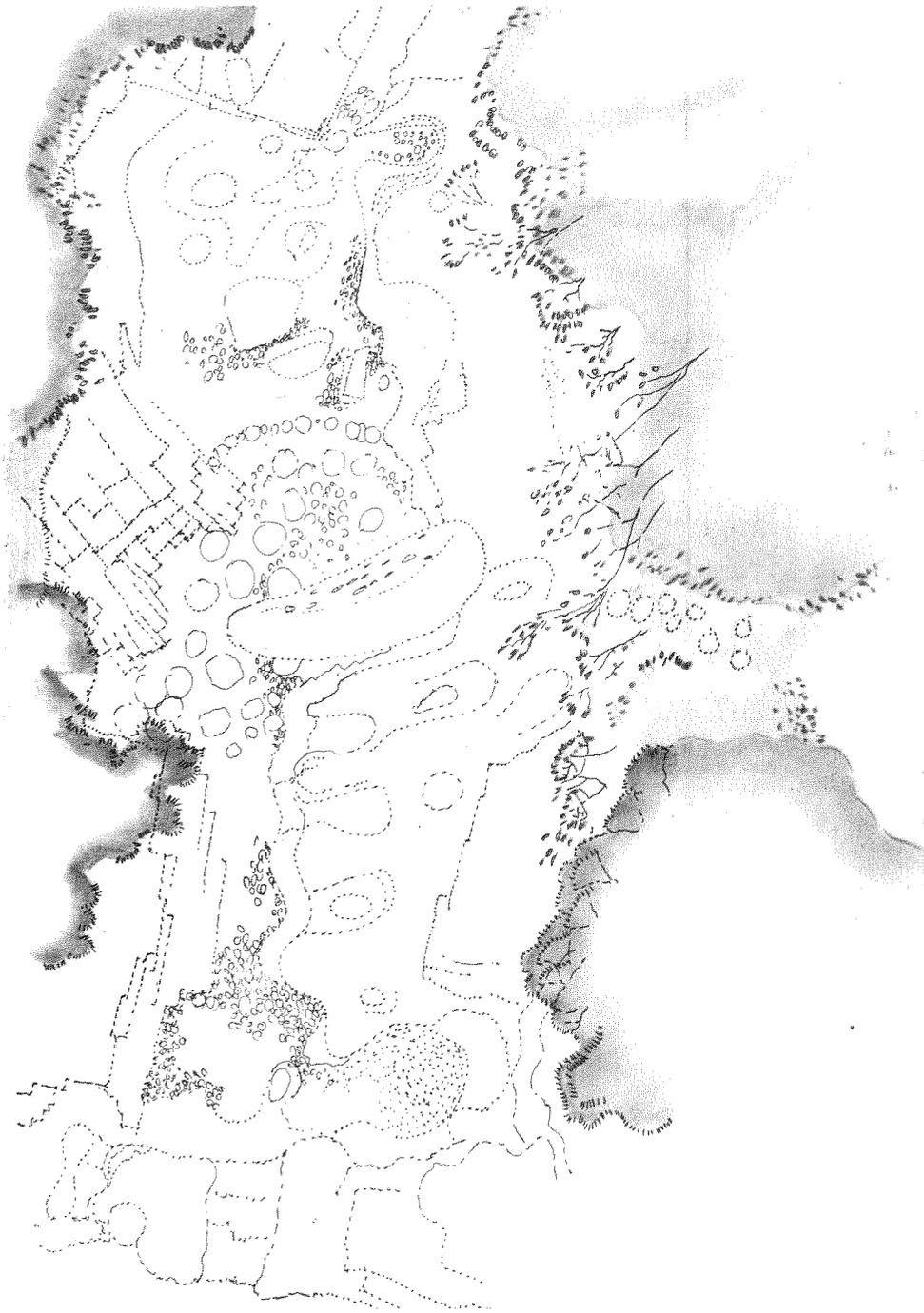
To sit in its gurgling, rushing presence, to gaze into its welling, glistening surface is to come away renewed. More serious restoring, however, can be achieved by alternatively baking the body on the ledge and rolling into the water's icy depths.





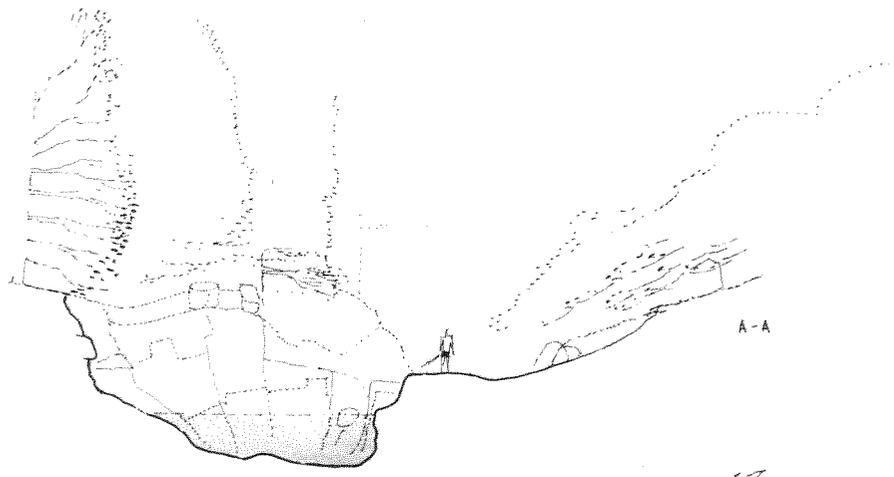


Photographs of Whiteface Swimming Hole by John R. Myer

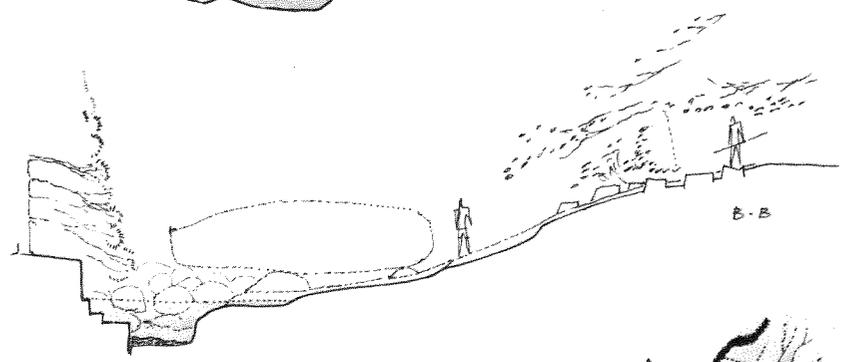


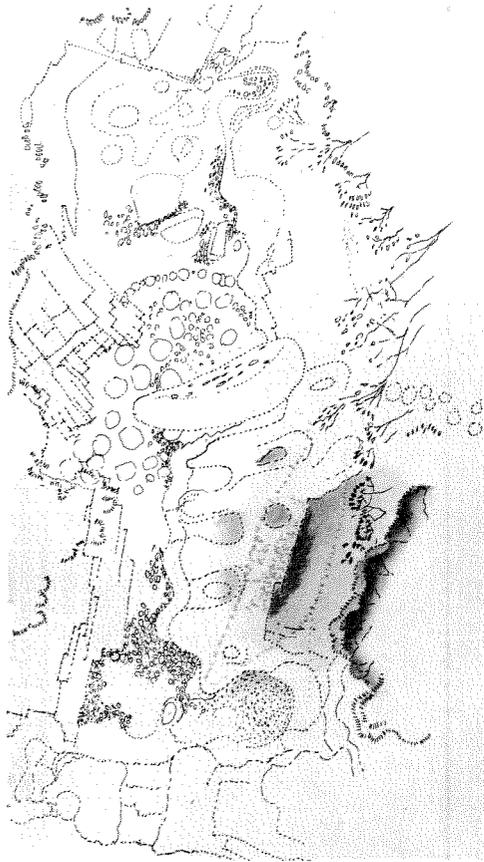
Leaves and needles of shrubs and trees define the lateral spatial boundary of the place, more than ledge or any other element. On the west side, they are uniformly high, a kind of limiting edge. On the east and entry side, they are lower, made up of large shrubs and small trees, their trunks and roots held back to the high water mark of spring floods.

I must make sections to explain things. Section A-A (see location diagram) shows the most vertical dimension of the place: the deepest water, the highest face of ledge surmounted by the highest tree. The total vertical run is some 70 feet.



Section B-B shows the most horizontal part of the place: the low trees on the east and entry side, the shallow water, the horizontal middle boulder, which so importantly divides upper place from lower place. The verticality of the limiting western edge is also shown here.

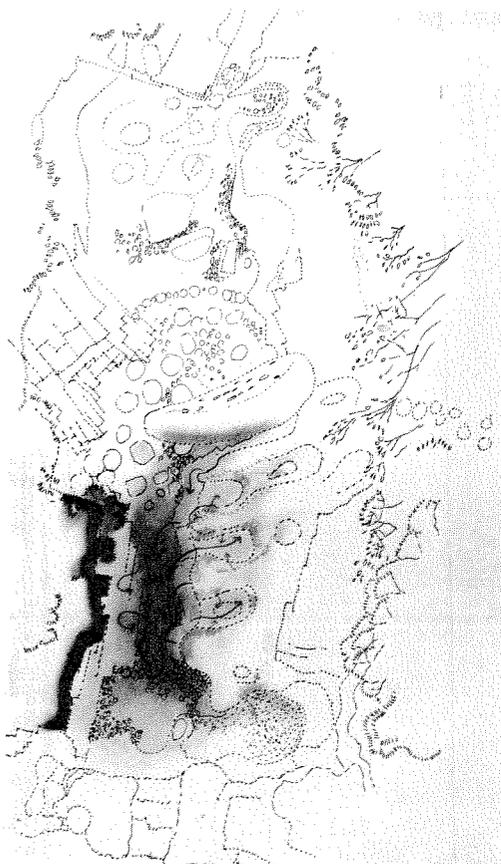




Within these extensive systems, there is another whole order of place. They are the *near places* that one inhabits variably depending on sun, temperature, wind, time of day, whether you are alone or with others, who else is there, which near places are available. Their extent and character became clear as I drew them, based on a history of use and how I had come to know them, think of them, describe them to others as places to meet. Two surprising aspects surfaced in doing this: the perceived set of near places did not seem to overlap their neighbors, even without any sharp topographic boundary, and they remained stable in my mind over the years since the study. I doubt very much that every place would yield such places.

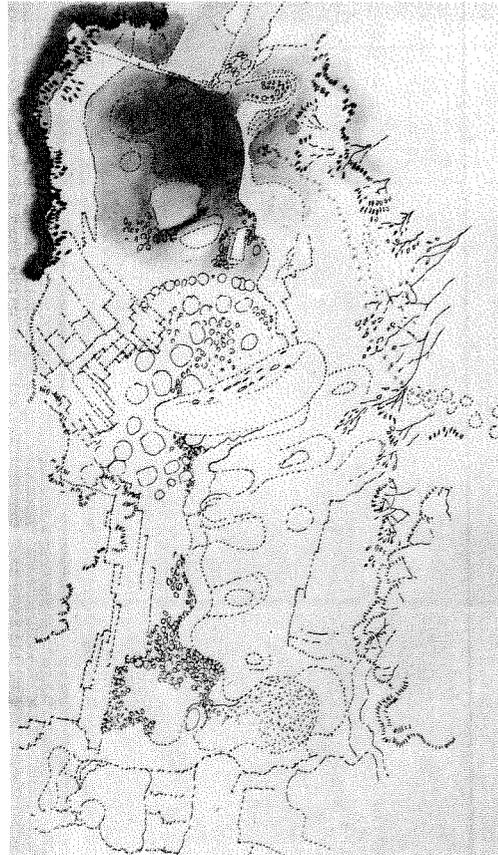
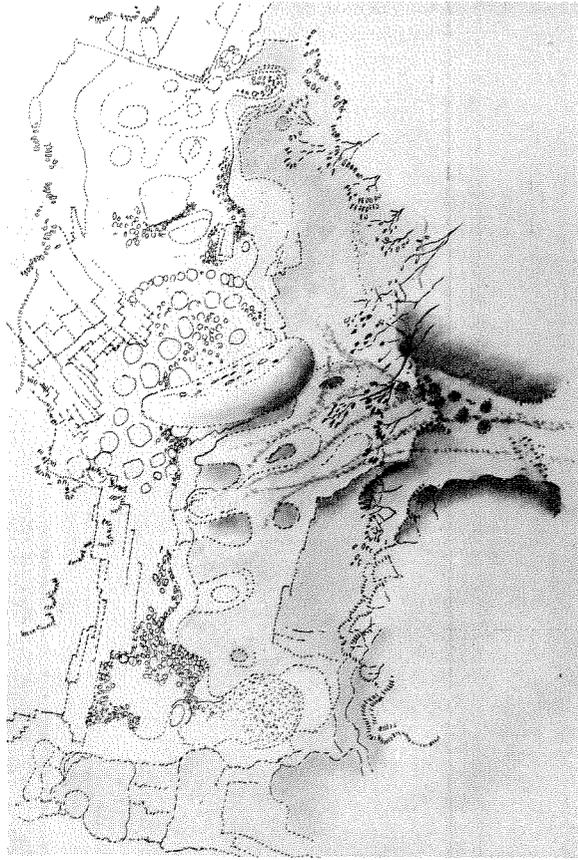
One of these near places is organized about a 30-inch-high granite “bench” just off the lower part of the stream, a kind of sluiceway with side pools. The bench is good for a standing picnic, where lunch baskets, drink containers, newspapers, books, and towels can be spread out for a number to eat while standing, to talk variably to one person and then another, watch children in the water, or read a newspaper. It is not so good a place to be by oneself.

The place off of the “lunch bench” is a kind of narrow sluiceway with water moving medium fast through it. It has a series of microharbors off of it, smooth granite basins, good for babes and guardians to get into at the top end and float down, partially or wholly submerged. You do not stay too long in the water here, as it is limited in its natant options. It is an excellent place to sit for a while and gaze at the moving water.



There is one principal entry to the whole bathing place, which makes a transition from the car parking place to the bathing world. One enters on dropping ground under low branches and leaves. The footing is complicated, stony, and not altogether easy, so each step requires attention. It is only at the edge of the trees that one can look up or down to see who is there, what near places are available. There is a directional assumption in this entry place that favors going below the great middle boulder. If one prefers to go above the middle boulder, one must cross the directionality of ledge, small longitudinal pools, branches, and the boulder itself. The entry is not a place where one stays. One rather travels across it and goes up or down the stream.

The position of the rock at the upper pool is special. It is one-sixth of the way up in the 70-foot vertical run between the pool bottom and the rising ledge, surmounted by the treetops (see section A-A). The specialness of this position is only challenged by the pool itself. In fact, the two form a couplet rock and pool, dry and wet, a place deep down from the sky and treetops into which morning sun finds its way. This could have been a quarry from which stone was cut, but it is natural and found. Something else as serious as quarried rock is found here.





Peak occupancy of the whole place as it might be on a hot fourth of July at noon.

Some Concluding Notes

There were a number of ways in which the Whiteface reference was put to use in that and subsequent design studios. It was found to some degree liberating to be able to make use of a found natural reference rather than a customary man-made one. It was possible for some to see things in a new way. The thought processes seemed to be freer.

At the outset it was valuable to be able to point out that places which are truly wonderful for us, such as Whiteface, hold a kind of mystery that is not possible to fully know or explain. They connect to us at root in an undefinable way.

But we can get closer to what makes a place wonderful by careful thought. My need to understand Whiteface for myself revealed two sets of underlying order: the *extensive systems* (ledge, pebbles-stones-boulders, water, flora, and people) and the *near places* (lunch bench, lower sluiceway, entry place, upper pool). This way of ordering seemed very close to that of urban and architectural form as we currently think of it. These two orders and the relationship between them proved valuable to discuss in a number of ways.

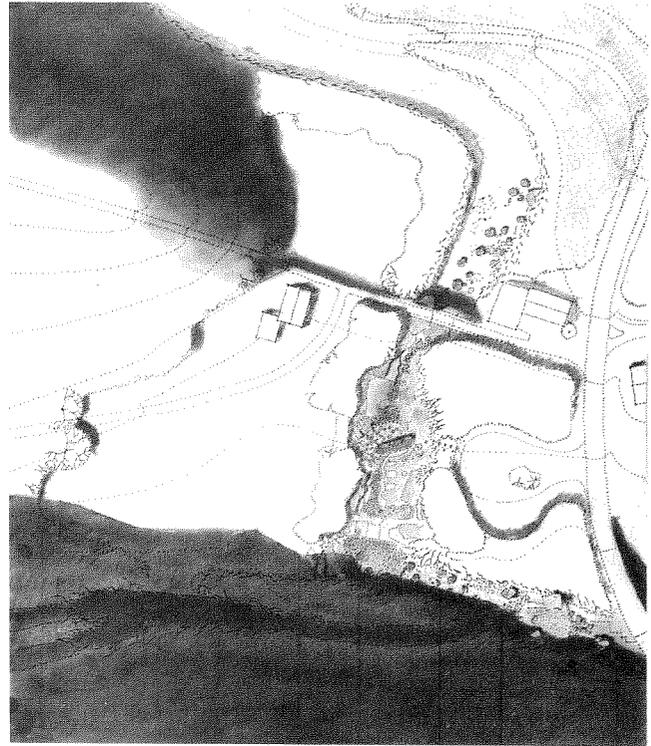
One can readily see here that near places are made up of an assembly of extensive systems. But they are not alike. They are importantly

different, complementing each other in their form and use.

In this friendly context for small places, it can be understood that a single part need not be everything. Rather, it can get on with doing what it does well, bringing that quality to this assemblage of potent smaller things. The fact that the lunch bench does not have water (except in flood) really should not be a problem, and I think it is not. This varied virtue is particularly pleasing to us because in it we find our own complementary, particular, and contributing selves. There is a quality here not always found in contemporary urban order.

Seen through J. B. Jackson's view of spatial order, the larger scale processes and forms here do not dominate the local ones. It is possible to have through traffic (water, pebbles-stones-boulders, people) in happy coexistence with, say, the upper pool's quality of containment. This is a particularly important reference in dealing with our habit of seeing traffic as dominating, creating inescapable tubelike forms, such as our streets' tyranny along their edges.

The great size, strength, toughness, and weight of ledge enhance the sense of potency of the small pieces. Small is made more potent both by contrast with large and by being part of it, by



Context

being made from it. This double reading of the small place seems key to the sense of potency present in each.

There is in this friendly assemblage of places, which so persistently engages our interest, the implication of an anthropocentric order revealed.

Obviously I have not touched on many aspects of Whiteface: the impact of changing seasons, the rate of change over time that might be anticipated, the management of the place, and so forth. That will have to be for another time.