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### Author

Hester, Randy

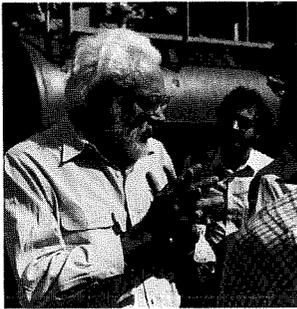
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# Labors of Love in the Public Landscape

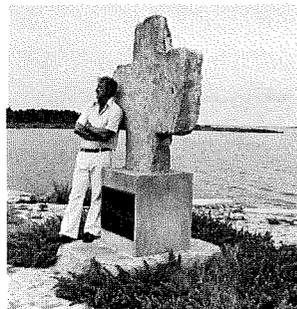
## Randy Hester



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### 1 Richard Haag

### 2 Robin Moore

### 3 Jule Burrus

Richard Haag, Robin Moore, and Jule Burrus have labored for 40 years on the public landscapes in their communities. The results of their efforts provide a new model for making places that are meaningful, not merely tasteful.

In Seattle, landscape architect Richard Haag has spent nearly 20 years building Gas Works Park, first determining what was most valuable on the site, then battling public opposition to save the derelict gas works. He practically lived there—nurturing the project, designing the place—and observed the site’s transformation from an object of controversy into a popular playground, a place with a character of its own.<sup>1</sup>

In Berkeley, planner-educator Robin Moore works almost daily on the Washington Environmental Yard, a project he initiated a decade ago. He wanted to turn the asphalt wasteland around Washington Elementary School into a place for the community to come together, create, learn, and play. On a given day Robin may be found going over construction plans with school children, parents, and city staff, reviewing the curriculum of the school or advising on the management of an intensively cultivated urban garden. Years of conflict, controversy, and sacrifice to make this innovative schoolyard work are beginning to pay off.<sup>2</sup>

Across the country in the coastal town of Manteo, North Carolina, motel owner and town commissioner Jule Burrus has labored weekly since 1973 to reclaim a vacant lot for his town’s first park. Using scavenged seedlings and brick and concrete rubble salvaged from an old high school building, he has created a green oasis amidst decaying buildings along the town’s waterfront. Although officially

named American Revolution Bicentennial Park, everyone calls it Jule’s Park as a tribute to Burrus’s toil. His work has inspired others, and Jule’s Park has sparked a community improvement effort.<sup>3</sup>

Projects like these can be found all over the country, in cities and at country crossroads. Almost every community has one: a labor of love that originates as one person’s dream of what his town should have. Success requires a sustained effort and sacrifice that may be viewed at the same time by the community as eccentric, though respected. It is the sort of project that can make heroes and heroines out of ordinary people, create local legends, and turn unused places into worthwhile spaces.

## Innovation

These projects usually begin with a new idea about an environment close to home. When the city of Seattle purchased the ugly, defunct gas-works site in 1962 and proposed to demolish the industrial ruins for a park, Richard Haag and everyone else in the city was pleased.<sup>4</sup> But six years later Haag hit upon a new and different idea. Familiarity with the site led him to discover a sculptural beauty in the despised black pipes and towers. Haag recalls that the guardian spirit of the place told him to leave the plant’s ruins and build the park around them. His mentor agreed, suggesting that the values expressed by the counterculture would make his idea appropriate “way down the road.”<sup>5</sup> Haag was “literally in love with the place,” and after spending

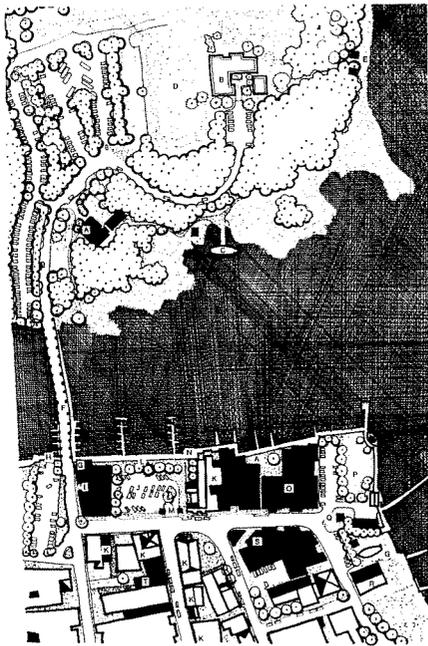


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#### **4 Jule's Park**

Jule's Park was raised to a near religious plane through the use of symbolic rubble, memorial lamps, and the theme of building from ruins.

(Photograph by Aycock Brown, courtesy of the Town of Manteo, North Carolina)



- |                                |                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| A Living-Learning Center       | K Sacred Buildings                    |
| B Performing Arts Center       | L Sacred Tree                         |
| C Elizabethan Ship             | M Sacred Gate                         |
| D Anglo-American Folk Festival | N Boardwalk                           |
| E Beach                        | O New Housing-Commercial Condominiums |
| F Bridge                       | P Jule's Park                         |
| G Exhibits                     | Q Sacred Statue                       |
| H Town Launch                  | R Boat Building Center                |
| I Inn                          | S New Housing-Commercial              |
| J Sacred Lot                   | T Infill Buildings                    |

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## 5 Manteo Village Plan

### 6 Jule's Park Plan

Although Jule's Park has inspired other waterfront improvements including the multi-million-dollar Manteo Village redevelopment, Burrus resists modifying his park. The boardwalk that was intended to connect all waterfront activities stopped abruptly at Jule's Park, which maintains its homemade style. The entire Manteo Village Plan was modified to conform to the casual character of Jule's Park, which residents felt was more in keeping with their community.

\$6,000 of his own money for renovations, moved his office into an old blacksmith shop on the site.<sup>6</sup> He was convinced he knew what the gas plant should be.

### Sacrificial Struggle

If the process begins with passion and an idea, it is sustained by struggle. Since by definition innovation involves changing the way things are done, most people are skeptical, sometimes even hostile, and certainly not forthcoming with the resources necessary for its implementation. People in Seattle found Haag's idea outrageous and said so. "Newspaper columns, his peers and enraged citizens attacked him," reported one publisher; only someone as "stubborn and committed as Haag could have survived the community's ridicule."<sup>7</sup> Many of his friends and associates privately voiced their doubts to Haag as well.<sup>8</sup> He recalls that he had little encouragement even among the people in his own office.

Robin Moore faced similar opposition to his Washington Environmental Yard project. The educational approach it entailed was so novel that a number of key school district and city officials opposed it. The junk on the play yard was teaching material to passersby who complained to school officials. They in turn threatened to close the project down until plywood walls enclosed the site. Although many of Moore's colleagues were appalled by the project, he has continued to work

on it without pay for five years. His tenacity has made him a neighborhood legend. His commitment has inspired others to take responsibility for managing and maintaining the site.

When Jule Burrus began creating his waterfront park again the townspeople were skeptical and the town board unwilling to supply the funds. His colleagues disapproved and people made fun of the idea of trying to beautify such a wasteland. He ignored the criticism and showed the strength of character needed to introduce an innovation.

### Action and Involvement

The campaign to win support and resources eventually yielded results. When Burrus realized he could use the rubble from the old county high school that was being torn down, he persuaded a local contractor to move the rubble to the park site at no cost. Because older townspeople had attended the school that was being demolished, the rubble had sentimental value for most residents, and by using it Burrus symbolically involved them in his project. People became more sympathetic to his idea, although he was still without official sanction. He reinforced the idea by using the theme "building from ruins" for the proposed park, a phrase related to the catastrophes in the town's history since 1584.<sup>9</sup>

This historical theme allowed him to persuade the town board to endorse his efforts as part of the American Bicentennial celebration. Official recognition was important:

supporting an unauthorized project suggested a kind of civil disobedience that few in the community would willingly undertake. Although quasi-illegality can be attractive to innovators (Haag, for example, recalls the camaraderie his group experienced when they were ejected from their blacksmith-shop office by Seattle authorities during a storm), official approval is prerequisite to widespread involvement. For success a strategy has to be devised to attract the support of elected officials. Haag tried to persuade community and civic groups first, “going for the capillaries, not the jugular,” so they in turn could persuade the unwilling mayor to adopt the plan. In Burrus’s case official endorsement came rather easily, partly because he was an elected official, partly because the project had gained widespread support, and partly because he had succeeded in tying it to a special event, the American Bicentennial celebration.

Burrus was then able to solicit help. A local handyman collected beach sand that had blown across nearby streets and dumped it on the high-school rubble as fill. The electric-power company sold him lamps at cost, and Burrus got residents to donate them as memorials to loved ones.<sup>10</sup> A local cement company, using a piece of rubble broken into the shape of a cross, erected a monument in keeping with the park’s theme. Still Burrus labored daily, doing most of the work himself with help from one other resident. He was always there to lead, to organize, to solicit help, to

persuade people of the project’s merits. But Burrus’s use of the symbolic rubble, of the memorial theme and lamps, raised the project to a patriotic plane that allayed the skepticism innovation always elicits.

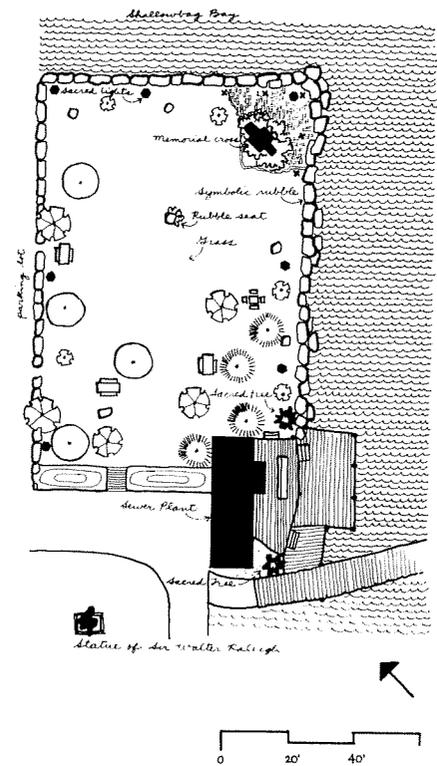
### Campaign of Education

In the cases of the Washington Yard and Gas Works Park, it was more difficult to persuade the public. Moore and a sympathetic principal held workshops with the teachers to interest them. A drop-in clinic was set up to solicit opinions. Questionnaires went out to children, teachers, and parents, asking what they wanted to have developed.<sup>11</sup> As people began to express their own wishes for the project, opposition waned.

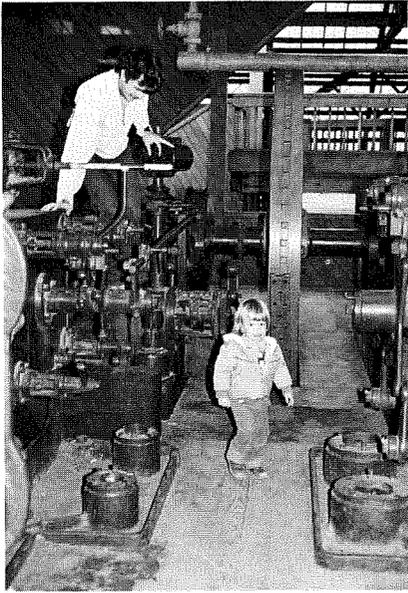
To end the opposition to his idea for saving the Seattle Gas Works, Richard Haag developed a slide show that he used in his three-year campaign of education. The slides portrayed the gas works as multi-purpose modern art. He also gave parties on the site and sponsored bus trips so local officials could look at the possibilities as he proposed them. After nearly three dozen public showings, Haag had opened many eyes and minds to the potential beauty of the site, and people began to “respond with more tolerance and, occasionally, enthusiastic support.”<sup>12</sup>

### Results

Public education can only do so much. It can neutralize detractors and inspire participants, but in the



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#### 7 Gas Works Park

Haag's Gas Works Park emphasizes human movement and activity rather than the traditional preoccupations with edge articulation and joining materials. The results may seem junky to the designer's eye but are the delight of participants.

end success depends on results demonstrating that the plan will work. This is especially difficult to do in projects of this sort because resources are limited and construction slow. Three years elapsed between the time Haag obtained the contract to design Gas Works Park and the time construction began. But only months after he had the contract, Haag had converted the blacksmith shop into his on-site office, and that at least served to persuade the public that the filthy, ugly gas works could be used. For the first phase of construction he chose visible and popular facilities: a picnic and play area, a grassy mound with trees and shrubs, and an observation station to oversee the whole site. Only then did he begin work on recycling the more controversial gas-generating towers.<sup>13</sup>

Robin Moore's master plan called for a number of small projects: yard festivals, a garden, murals, and workshops, but progress was slow. Ten years went by before the central community play area was built, and the school principal admitted that acceptance of the Washington Environmental Yard was slowed by the failure to show visible results earlier in the process.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the first phase of Jule's Park was completed in a year. Burrus had carefully planted the idea in enough minds to be able to mobilize important community resources when he was ready to begin. Although Burrus continues to work on the park, the first phase of construction, a landscaped lawn, was finished in 1975 to provide a

place for community festivals and religious and civic functions. Burrus remembered that "town involvement and donations continued steadily after the initial effort became visible." The most prominent memorial, which towers over the park like a protective father, was given by the women's club: a twenty-foot statue of Sir Walter Raleigh, carved from a single cypress tree.<sup>15</sup>

#### Transfer

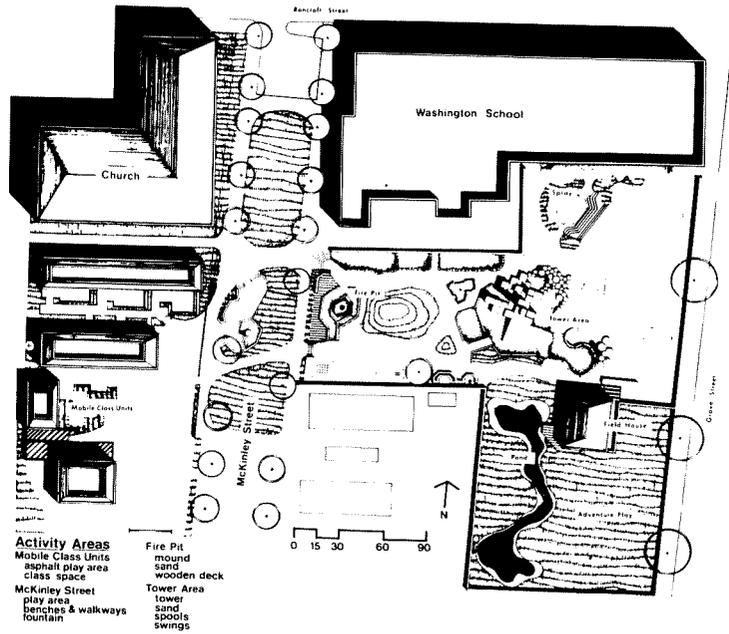
The next stage in the project is usually the vindication of the designer who has withstood the community's scorn and has made sacrifices to see his dreams realized. Once the project shows tangible results, it is usually accepted, although sometimes still grudgingly, by the community. The originator often continues to work, sometimes throughout his life, but eventually he transfers the responsibility to others. Nearby residents maintain Jule's Park. One woman described "evening walks through the park, with friends and their private 'trash pick-up' campaigns to keep the park clean." Another 80-year-old woman frequently mows the park lawn as if it were an extension of her own backyard.<sup>16</sup>

As responsibility is transferred to others, the facility changes. Although change is necessary if the project is to be sustained, the process can be painful for the founder. Haag is glad people take pride in his Gas Works Park and that many groups have established symbolic ownership of it, but he also admits that he "still feels very proprietary" about it.<sup>17</sup> He cringes

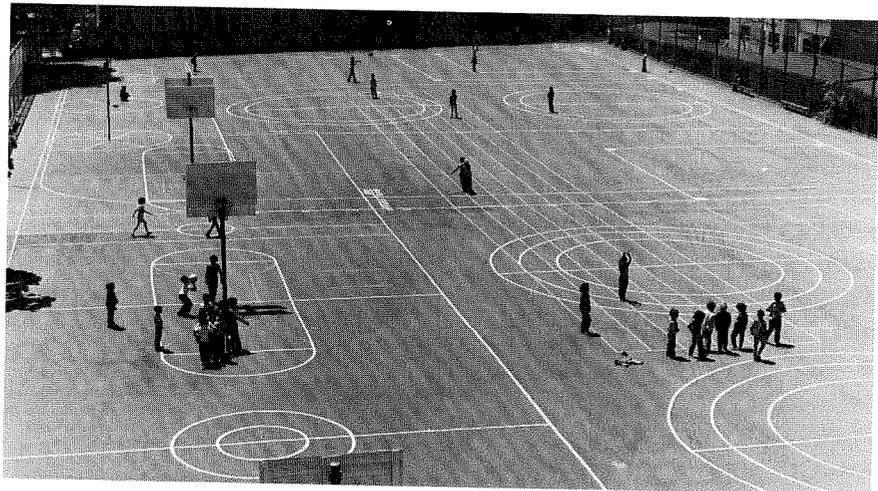
when he mentions the chainlink fence the parks department installed to keep people out of a tower.<sup>18</sup>

Jule's Park has inspired other waterfront improvements in Manteo, thereby changing its function, but Burrus resists modifying his concept to conform to an outside designer's master plan. He has welcomed small changes by fellow citizens, however, a hallmark of all these parks: flexibility allows others to use the places as they please, to create their own labors of love, but it requires planning and intervention that are hardly noticeable. Moore developed an extremely flexible master plan<sup>19</sup> that encourages community artists and gardeners to work there. Haag's has been called a "splendidly simple format,"<sup>20</sup> which he describes "as an open space to encompass and allow for continual change and adaptations."<sup>21</sup>

Projects of this sort typically begin as an individual, sometimes elitist idea. They are neither participatory nor populist in origin, and consequently one might expect them to be rigidly designed, but in fact the contrary is true. Each of the projects described here has a clear unifying structure that is inviolable, but nonetheless open-ended, possibly because the designer is aware that the task is too great for one person alone, and he will have to accommodate the wishes of others in order to solicit their help. Sometimes the designer is so aware of his need to create that he is sensitive to the needs of others to do the same. The result is a frame-



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8 Washington Environmental Yard Plan  
9 Totally asphalted yard, 1971

work structured in a way that allows other users to undertake small projects, such as the sundial which Seattle sculptor Charles Greening placed atop the grassy mound in Gas Works Park.<sup>22</sup>

For Bicentennial Park, Burrus developed only a sketch plan required for a dredging permit; the plan changed as he proceeded, or as other townspeople added their own touches. When planners suggested changing the park, one local newspaper printed an editorial against it by arguing that the park was a “perfect jewel.”<sup>23</sup> The process had gone full circle from innovation, opposition, sacrificial struggle, through action, education, and involvement to a result that vindicated its creator by being adapted and institutionalized by the community. Some citizens became defenders as passionate about the idea as the original designer, starting the process all over again with new labors, but now also with a foundation on which to build.

There is nothing new about these eccentric labors of love. They have long been at the root of folk design, and sometimes capture national attention—as the Watts Towers in Los Angeles did, for example. But they represent a model for social design that is worth encouraging because it provides a vehicle for introducing environmental innovation. They are born of creative necessity, thrive where resources are scarce, and produce flexible environments that are humane—all considerations of importance to designers today.

These projects are particularly significant for designers searching for images that express a more humanistic trend. In contrast to the numerous environments that are mass-produced, these labors of love are built and symbolically owned by the community. They are idealistic as well as functional places. The honest, unself-conscious effort and sacrifice create a sense of place for laborers and users alike. In Manteo, for example, a survey of townspeople indicated that they looked upon Jule’s Park as being a more sacred place than local churches. It had become what Ted Relph calls an “authentic” place.<sup>24</sup>

These community projects have less clearly articulated boundaries than recent landscape designs. Haag interprets this practice as indicative of the movement away from “a preoccupation with joining materials” and toward emphasis on human activity. “The traditional design would have bulk-headed the entire waterfront to create a clean, well-defined edge, but we have all sorts of edges, some hard, some muddy, some sloppy, and look at how people use it.”<sup>25</sup> The variety of activities that go on along the water’s edge would indeed be difficult to imagine had the bulkhead been continuous.

The indifference to edge articulation has created an aesthetic unacceptable to some designers, who view the water’s edge of Gas Works Park, the rubble edge in Jule’s Park, and the woods and ponds at Washington Environmental Yard as unsightly, uncrafts-

manly, unpolished, dangerous, unprofessional, and dysfunctional.<sup>26</sup> From the point of view of classical design, these projects are nightmares, but to others they represent a move toward a more participatory and humanistic aesthetic, whatever mistakes they might make. The challenge for designers is to integrate their professional knowledge with the energetic local action represented by such labors.

Designers are most apt to build their labors of love where they live. They know the community intimately, and they are familiar with local user evaluations and adjustments in the environment. Long-term involvement might even be a prerequisite for developing an appropriate model for the practice of humanistic design. Practitioners may find themselves in the roles of grassroots organizers, environmental educators, and landscape managers as well as form givers, especially if they want to create meaningful, and not merely tasteful, places.

Because these labors of love require long effort, that investment usually ensures a well-cared-for environment,<sup>27</sup> if it becomes meaningful to the users. In each of the cases cited, the designers planted trees. At Gas Works Park, Haag points with pride to “my trees, I grew them from seedlings” as he walks by a stand of 15-foot maples.<sup>28</sup> Moore encouraged residents to plant trees at Washington Environmental Yard, and Burrus purchased Italian cypresses in California and drove



#### **10 Overview of the Environmental Yard, 1981**

When Moore began working at the Washington School, he created an extremely flexible master plan that was open-ended to encourage community-built projects. Those small projects incrementally transformed the barren asphalt first into a more diverse play space and eventually into a child's wonderland.

(Photograph of the partly developed yard by Drew Werby. Photographs of the asphalted yard and the Environmental Yard by Robin Moore)

them across the country to plant in Bicentennial Park. In each case the trees symbolize concern with the environment.<sup>29</sup> Professional design awards ought perhaps to be given annually for projects that encourage this kind of environmental ethic.<sup>30</sup> Otherwise such important projects may continue to be ignored because they are unsightly to design juries. It is also entirely possible that participatory, humanistic design will produce no single star in architecture and design, but constellations of local heroes and heroines, creating in ways that are innovative, sensitive, and appropriate to their own communities.

Labors of love offer innovative solutions to community problems. Gas Works Park introduced the notion that wasteland could be turned into enjoyable open space. Washington Environmental Yard is recognized as a model for integrating play and learning by changing the outdoor environment. Jule's Park represents an early attempt to preserve open space and encourage urban redevelopment using conservation as a theme. Projects like these also encourage community cooperation and heighten environmental and political awareness.

The three projects taken together provide one model for a more humanistic design process, in its combination of innovation, struggle, and vindication. The results are identifiable, yet flexible spaces, symbolically charged, meaningful places that invite us to use them and encourage us to care for them. But they also raise questions: is humanistic design just



a last-ditch effort to save a sense of place that will inevitably be lost? Or a model for community space-making for the future?<sup>31</sup> Why did these three projects work? Are there others that did not? Can the processes represented by them be reconciled with traditional practice? Should they? Can they be planned, or must they occur spontaneously? How can professional and technical expertise be integrated efficiently and effectively into the process? Community designers, and, indeed, everyone concerned about design, will have to struggle with these questions. Only in this way can environmental philosophies be developed that will lead to models and methods for making humane spaces that contribute to man's sense of freedom and equality and acknowledge the need for a sense of place.

#### 11 Washington Environmental Yard, 1981

A labor of love can introduce an innovation like the integration of outdoor play and the school curriculum as done at Washington Yard. Such an innovation provides for everything from basketball to the study of Native American lifestyles. (Photograph by Robin Moore)

- 1 Craig Campbell, "Seattle's Gas Plant Park," *Landscape Architecture* (July 1973), p. 342.
- 2 Randolph T. Hester, Jr., *Neighborhood Space* (Stroudsbury, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson and Ross, Inc., 1975), p. 192.
- 3 Billie B. Harper, "Implementation of a Youth Center in Manteo, North Carolina, unpublished paper done for LAR 611, North Carolina State University, 1981, pp. 3-4. See also the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, *National Urban Recreation Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1978).
- 4 Grace Brynolson, "GasWorks (ugh!) reborn as a city park," *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 1977), pp. 117-119. Mrs. Myrtle Edwards, a member of the Seattle City Council and chairperson of the Parks Committee for 14 years, negotiated the purchase from the gas company, and the park was to be a memorial to her. After Haag convinced the city to save the gas plant, her family requested that the park not be named in her honor.
- 5 From conversation with Richard Haag, April 17, 1981.
- 6 Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 340.
- 7 Harriott Bullitt, "Pile of Junk Wins Design Award," *Pacific Northwest* (January/February 1981), p. 45.
- 8 Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 342.
- 9 Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 342. The town is near the site of the Lost Colony, England's first colony in the New World that survived from 1584-1587, but had lost its inhabitants by 1590. After the Civil War, a freedman's colony established nearby was obliterated. Twice in the 1900s most of the town burned.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- 11 Hester, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.
- 12 Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 342.
- 13 Memorandum of September 1975, "Seattle, Washington Gas Works Park Fact Sheet," Richard Haag, Associates, Inc., pp. 3-4.
- 14 Hester, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
- 15 Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Local people still consider themselves the spiritual descendants of the original colonists who came to the New World through the expedition organized by Sir Walter Raleigh.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 17 Paul Goldberger, "Gas Works is Centerpiece of Seattle Park," *New York Times* (Saturday, August 30, 1975).
- 18 From conversation with Richard Haag, April 17, 1981.
- 19 Hester, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
- 20 Sally Woodbridge, "It was a real gas," *Progressive Architecture* (November 1978), p. 98.
- 21 Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 338-339.
- 22 From conversation with Richard Haag while touring Gas Works Park, August 5, 1981.
- 23 Editorial, "Our Answers," *Coastland Times* (March 24, 1981), p. 4.
- 24 Billie B. Harper, "Special Places Survey," North Carolina State University, unnumbered summary chart results published in *A Guide for Development*, published by the Town of Manteo, North Carolina, 1981, p. 5.
- See also Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1980), pp. 63-78.
- 25 From conversation with Richard Haag, April 17, 1981, and August 5, 1981.
- 26 From a student evaluation of Washington Environmental Yard made as part of Landscape Architecture 231, Winter 1981, University of California, Berkeley.
- 27 In some cases the landscape seems abused and unloved as in the case of Washington Environmental Yard. In others, when the maintenance of the project exceeds the ability of the volunteer laborers it can easily fall into disrepair. Technical problems that sour a good intention can also produce poor results.
- 28 From conversation with Richard Haag while touring Gas Works Park, August 5, 1981.
- 29 This is a good example where technical knowledge would have benefited the labor of love. Although the tiles were lovingly treated, they were not well suited to the soil and microclimate.
- 30 In 1981 Gas Works Park won the President's Award, one of the highest honors given by the American Society of Landscape Architects.
- 31 Relph, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-147.