UC Berkeley
Places

Title
Great Site Works: Two California Outdoor Theaters

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xd6q0vq

Journal
Places, 10(3)

ISSN
0731-0455

Author
Jewell, Linda

Publication Date
1996-07-01

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

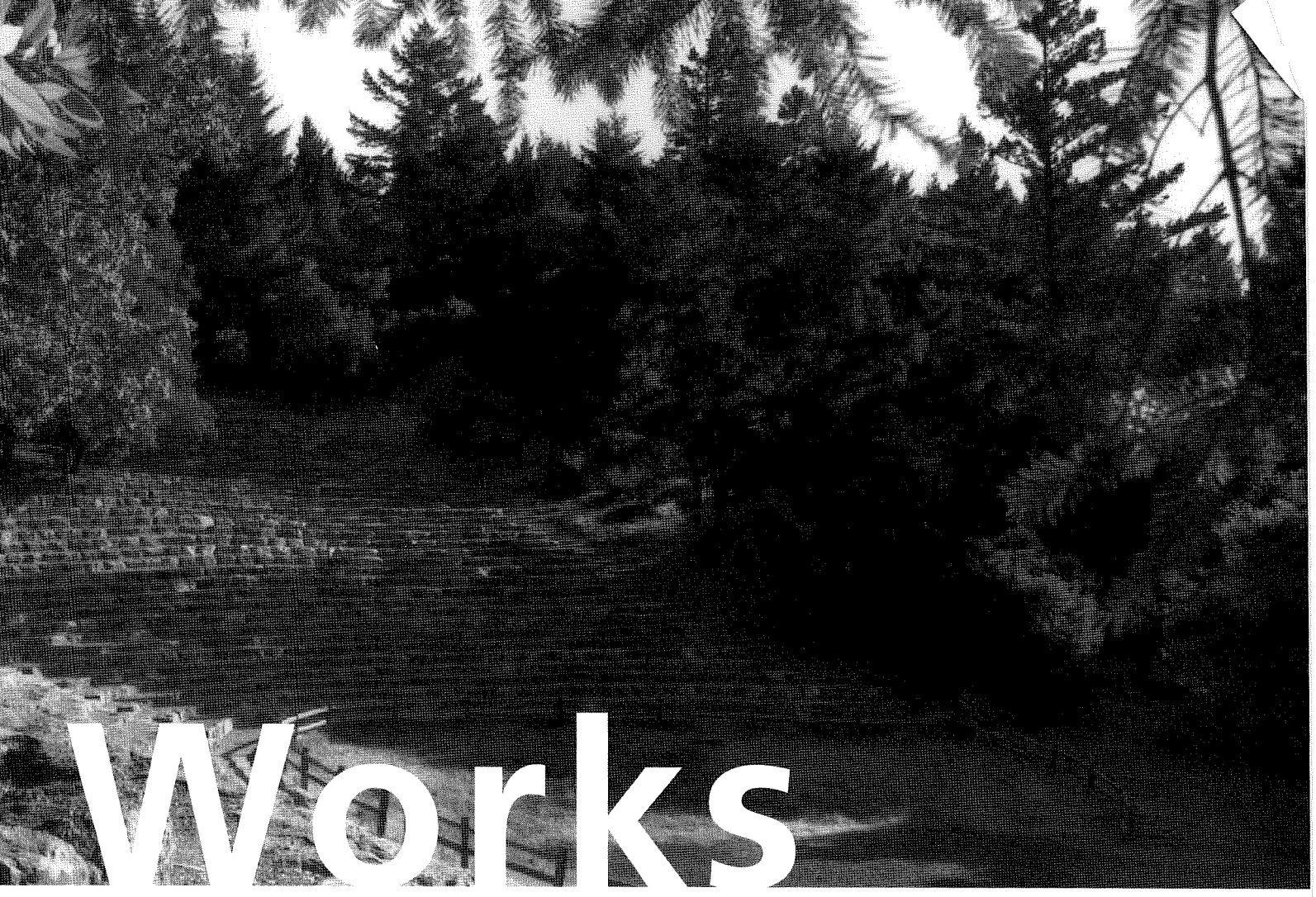
Linda Jewell

Great Site

Two California Outdoor Theaters

"...when the drama has been simplest, most genuine and lit up by the joy of living, it has had its setting in the open."

— Sheldon Cheney, *The Open Air Theater*, 1918



Works

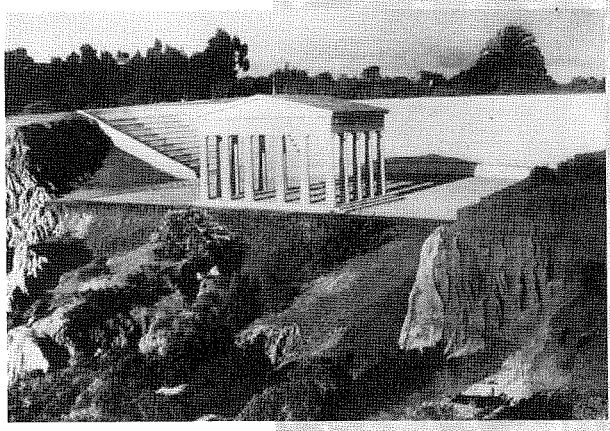
Sidney B. Cushing Amphitheater, Mt. Tamalpais, Marin County, Calif., 1994. Courtesy Anton Grassl.

Outdoor theaters have a uniquely close relationship to the landscapes they inhabit, particularly to the earth from which they are carved. Similar to the earthworks of today's environmental artists, they provide poignant insight into how a culture regards the landscape and nature. Exemplary outdoor theaters — constructed in America's estate gardens, parks, campuses and development projects — can provide models for creating memorable relationships between structure and site that reveal the unique character and spiritual power of a particular landscape.

Today we often associate outdoor theaters with large commercial facilities that offer music concerts to capacity crowds or historical dramas to summer tourists. Although outdoor theaters can be built at a fraction of the cost of similarly sized indoor theaters, they frequently mimic the characteristics of indoor theaters rather than capitalize on the unique opportunity of gathering citizens together in the landscape.

This disregard of the landscape setting in theater design was not always the case. During the early 1900s a "new drama" movement focused the creative energies of an avant-garde group of theatrical professionals, naturalists and designers on creating open air theaters that were an antidote to the increasing technical and commercial concerns of indoor theaters. Influenced by Greek artistic and democratic ideals, these theater enthusiasts envisioned theaters as community structures that would contribute to the spiritual and civic well-being of American life by making the joys, good health and inspiration of nature available to all.

This civic and environmental idealism was still evident in theaters built in the 1920s and in the Works Progress Administration theaters of the 1930s and '40s. After World War II, theater managers began updating older theaters and building new outdoor theaters with plastic seats, lighting structures, sound systems, concession facilities and canopies to provide the amenities found in interior theaters. The resulting structures often



"...through the spoken work, the rendition of music, through song and dance the outdoor theater can contribute to mental, physical and spiritual growth. If it is healthful to exercise, work, play, and sleep in the open, it should be even more beneficial to have our finer sensibilities unfolded in the same favorable atmosphere."

— Emerson Knight, Landscape architect, "Outdoor Theaters and Stadiums in the West," in *The Architect and Engineer*, 1924

Background: Bohemian Grove Theater, Guerneville, Calif. From Sheldon Cheney, *The Open Air Theater*, 1918. Inset: Theosophical Society Greek Theater, Point Loma, Calif., 1912. Courtesy San Diego Historical Society, photograph collection.

obliterated vistas and destroyed the topography, vegetation and other natural patterns of the original landscape. This shift of design priorities from the interpretation of the landscape setting to a fascination with technology and physical comfort has resulted in contemporary outdoor theaters that are not much different from indoor theaters with a hole in the roof.

Today, public concern for the preservation of natural environments has made it crucial that designers understand the opportunities and limitations of placing structures in the landscape. In spite of these concerns, designers accept any contemporary suburb as a testament to the commercial pressure to disregard the landscape entirely. It is daunting to realize that structures designed to showcase artistic endeavors — such as outdoor theaters — have also relegated the landscape to incidental importance.

Not all the news is bad. Knight's "favorable atmosphere" persists in many older outdoor theaters that continue to attract large audiences. The best known of these pre-World War II theaters is Colorado's beautiful Red Rocks Theater, designed by the architect Burnham Hoyt in 1936 and built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Despite what is considered a small seating capacity (9,000) that limits revenue, Red Rocks consistently wins *Pollstar* magazine's "best outdoor concert venue" survey of performers.

In other older theaters and at various impromptu found sites, audiences and performers frequently adapt to hard seats, awkward sight lines, minimal

stage lighting, rain and overhead air traffic to participate in cultural and civic events that engage the landscape. An understanding of these memorable older theaters can rekindle our commitment to creating structures that interpret and highlight a site's unique natural character and, consequently, inspire reflection on how culture can interface with the beauty and rhythms of nature.

Locating theater precedents that successfully interpret their site is difficult since there are only two American books on outdoor theaters: *The Open-Air Theater* (1918) by theater critic Sheldon Cheney and *Outdoor Theaters* (1917) by landscape architect Frank Waugh. The majority of the case study theaters in these books are still intact and in active use, a testament of the appeal and endurance of thoughtfully designed theaters. Both books discuss explicitly how the theaters address their surrounding landscapes, indicating this era's focus on the landscape.

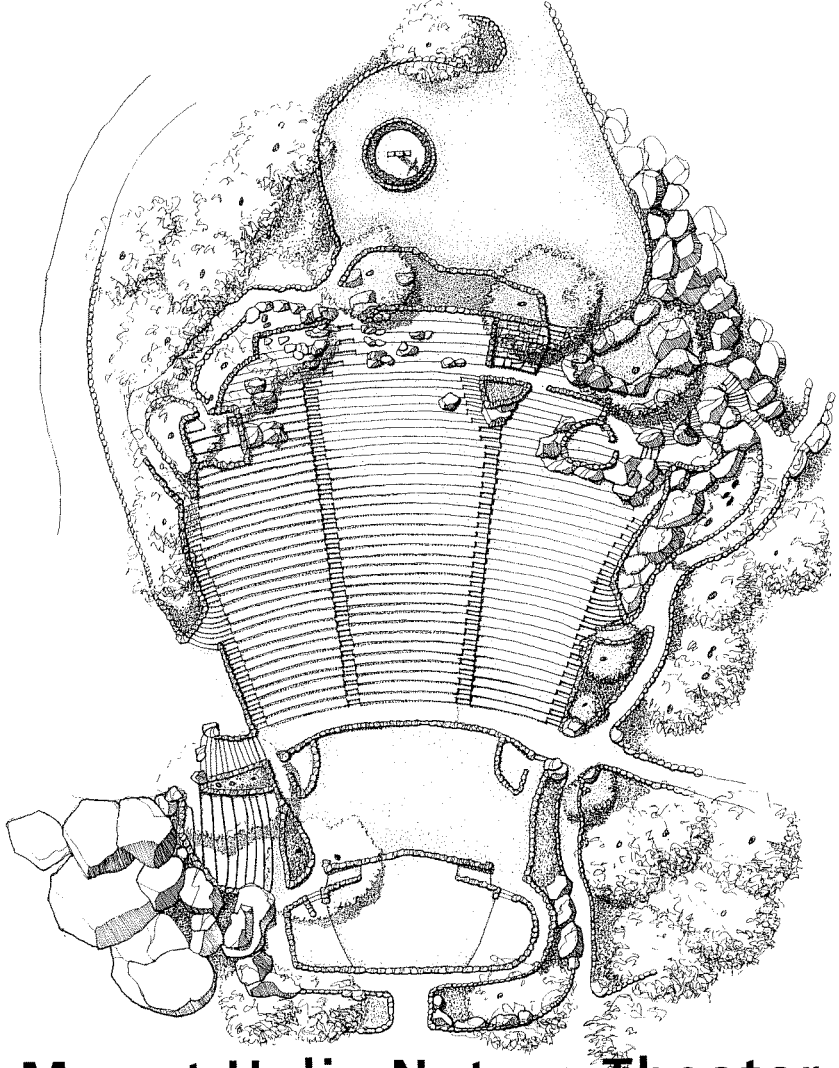
With insights pertinent to contemporary design, Cheney's book differentiates two design approaches. His "architectural theater" is most clearly depicted in the book's images of the 1901 Point Loma, Calif., Theosophical Society Greek Theater. This type juxtaposes strong geometric forms against the surrounding landscape to reveal characteristics of the site that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as a steep slope or an unusual rock formation that is highlighted by placing a contrasting wall behind it. The Theosophical Society Theater's white geometric forms contrast sharply with the adjacent canyon and coastline, focusing our attention on their rugged shapes. Like its classical Greek precedent, the still intact Theosophical Theater was sited for its view from the theater rather than by the appearance of the theater itself in the landscape.

Cheney's "nature theater" merges with the landscape, giving the impression that it is a part of its natural surroundings. With a stage background of vegetation or the landscape beyond, this theater type implies that both performers and audience are merely a part of the scenery. Seating is typically integrated into the topography, is built from materials indigenous to the site and is often interrupted by vegetation or stones. At one of Cheney's examples, the Guerneville, Calif., Bohemian Grove Theater, the stage evolved gradually on a redwood covered slope during the late nineteenth century. Its unique vertical stage still accommodates the annual Grove Plays, in which actors appear on three different levels from behind the redwoods.

The two California theaters derscribed in this article, Mount Helix Nature Theater and Mt. Talmalpais Mountain Theater, do not fit neatly into these categories, but instead exhibit properties of both theater types. The formal concepts of both theaters began with simple geometric ideas that, like Cheney's architectural theater, contrast with the geometries of the natural site. But these forms are modified, adjusted and distorted to respond to the natural patterns of the particular site. Many of these site-specific adjustments are apparent in the initial proposals, but significant modifications were made during construction when these schematic ideas were fine tuned to the particulars of their immediate landscapes.

A longer version of this article, and the photographs by Anton Grassl, are a part of a forthcoming book and exhibition, *Great SiteWorks: A Selection of American Outdoor Theaters*. The book will include twenty-five case studies of exemplary theaters drawn to the same scale with accompanying historical and contemporary photographs.

Funding for this research was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, Design Arts Program, and by the University of California, Berkeley, through its Committee on Research and the Department of Landscape Architecture's Farrand Fund. Research assistants were Terry Clements, Gail Donaldson, Meg Calkino and Adrienne Wong.



Location: Sloping east on a summit 1320 ft. above sea level 12 miles east of San Diego.
Designers: Richard Requa, architect; Emerson Knight, landscape architect.
Construction date: 1924-25.
Designated seats: 5,000.
Total capacity with seating on boulders and walls: 8,000.

Mount Helix Nature Theater

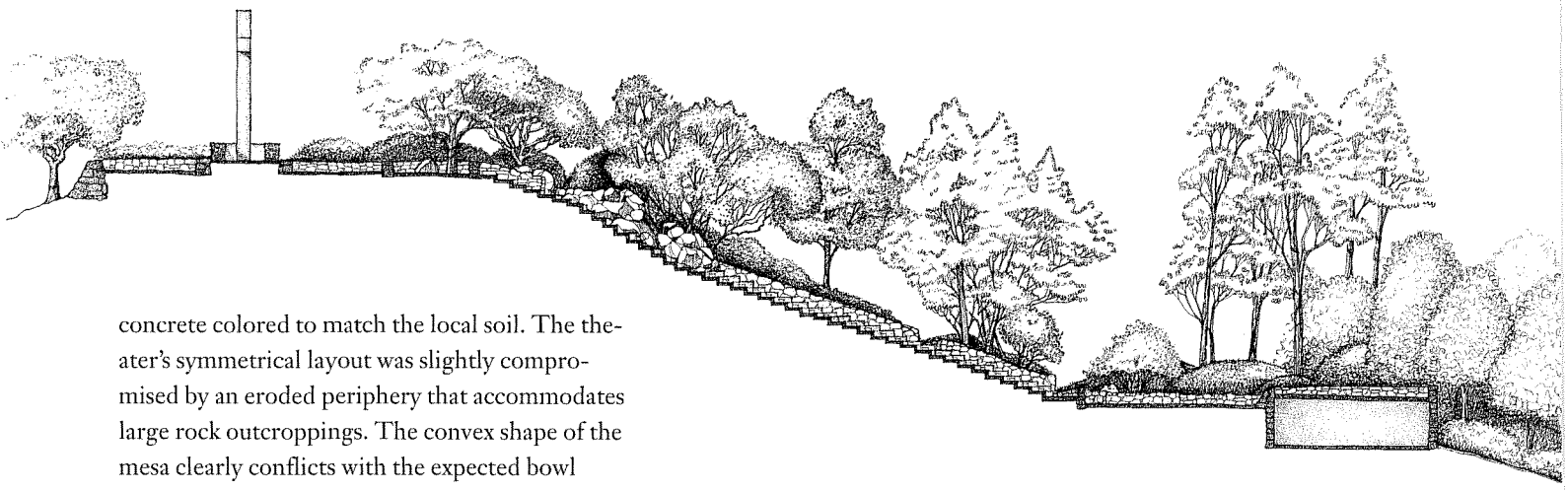
Each Easter since 1925, approximately 7,000 people have attended sunrise services in a grand theater atop Mt. Helix, the highest point in San Diego County. This mountaintop had attracted San Diego residents up a rough helix-shaped road to a panoramic vista long before the theater's 1925 dedication. Beginning in 1919, Easter worshipers walked two and a half miles up the mountain to crowd onto boulders and makeshift benches for a simple service with a spectacular sunrise view.

One nearby resident, Mary Carpenter Yawkey, came to the mountaintop frequently to meditate in this majestic natural setting. When Yawkey died in 1923 her daughter, Mary Yawkey White, and son, Cyrus Carpenter Yawkey decided to honor their mother by erecting a nature theater on top of Mt. Helix for "inspiration and public use." White asked Ed Fletcher, the local entrepreneur who owned the mountaintop, to sell the land. Instead, Fletcher donated it and designated his 23-year-old son, Ed Jr., to oversee construction of the project.

The Yawkeys hired Richard Requa and Emerson Knight to design the theater. Requa was a revered local architect who had designed many of the buildings in Balboa Park. Knight, a San Francisco landscape architect, had written extensively on outdoor theaters and designed several theaters in Northern California. The collaboration went well and they created a scheme that was distinct from the environs yet inspired by the rugged nature of the site:

"Mt. Helix rises from the mesas almost a perfect cone in outline to an altitude of 1,500 ft. A site more inspiring, more ruggedly picturesque, more accessible or otherwise more perfectly fitted to its purpose could hardly be found the world over. ...Every cut and fill, every rock formation and boulder and even every plant and shrub must be carefully considered so that perfect harmony of parts and unity with the setting is secured and maintained" (Requa, 1925).

The two men proposed a symmetrical, fan-shaped scheme to be built of indigenous stone and



concrete colored to match the local soil. The theater's symmetrical layout was slightly compromised by an eroded periphery that accommodates large rock outcroppings. The convex shape of the mesa clearly conflicts with the expected bowl shape of a theater, but Knight and Requa saw the power of this rugged site, with its extraordinary view, as reason enough to locate a theater there.

They then looked to the site itself to create a theater form that reflected the topography. The auditorium is long and narrow to minimize the amount of fill required to counter the conical shape of the mesa. The most unique adaptation is the way the aisles and central seating rise above the side sections to reflect the site's convexity, creating modulated shadow patterns along the stepped aisles:

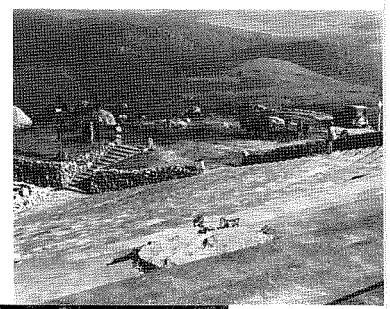
"This (convex) form has been preserved by so constructing the seats as to leave the middle section a foot higher than the side sections. The transition is effected first by a step down from the middle section to the adjoining aisles, and then by another step from these aisles down to the side sections" (Knight, 1925).

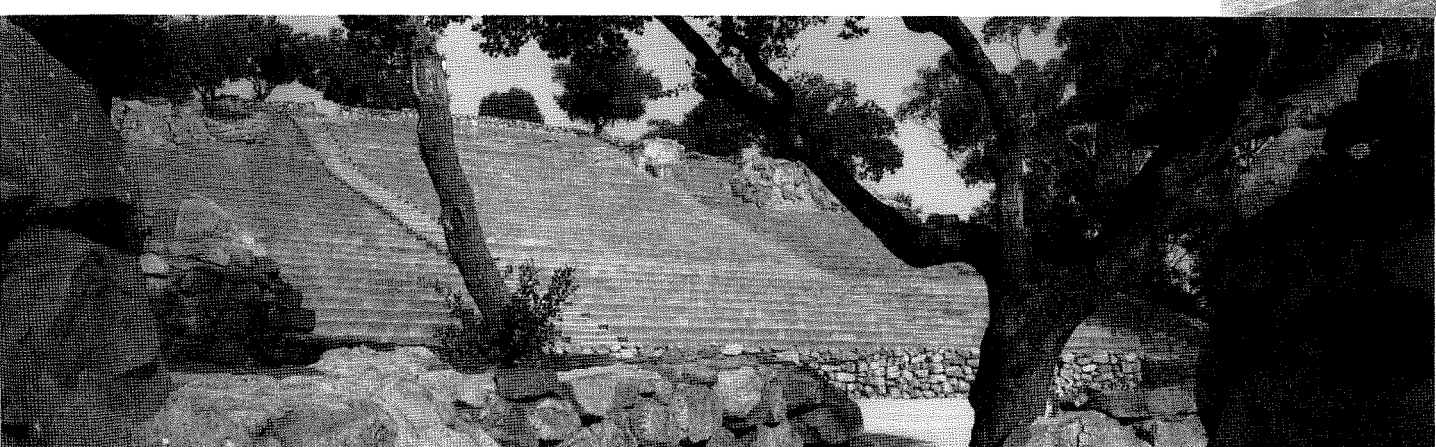
Although the theater was primarily built of materials found on the site, concrete and steel reinforcing were brought to the confined working area on a daily basis. In a recent interview construction manager Ed Fletcher, Jr., now 94, reminisced about the difficulties in transporting carloads of cement, tons of crushed rock, sand, steel and lumber up the mountain slope. They were able to bring only enough material for a day's work at a time, and they carefully avoided excavation that would require carrying drock and soil down the mountain. Due to the almost daily adjustments to subsurface conditions and an initial survey that had inaccurately located rock outcroppings, Requa visited the site several times a week to oversee the adaptation of the schematic plan.

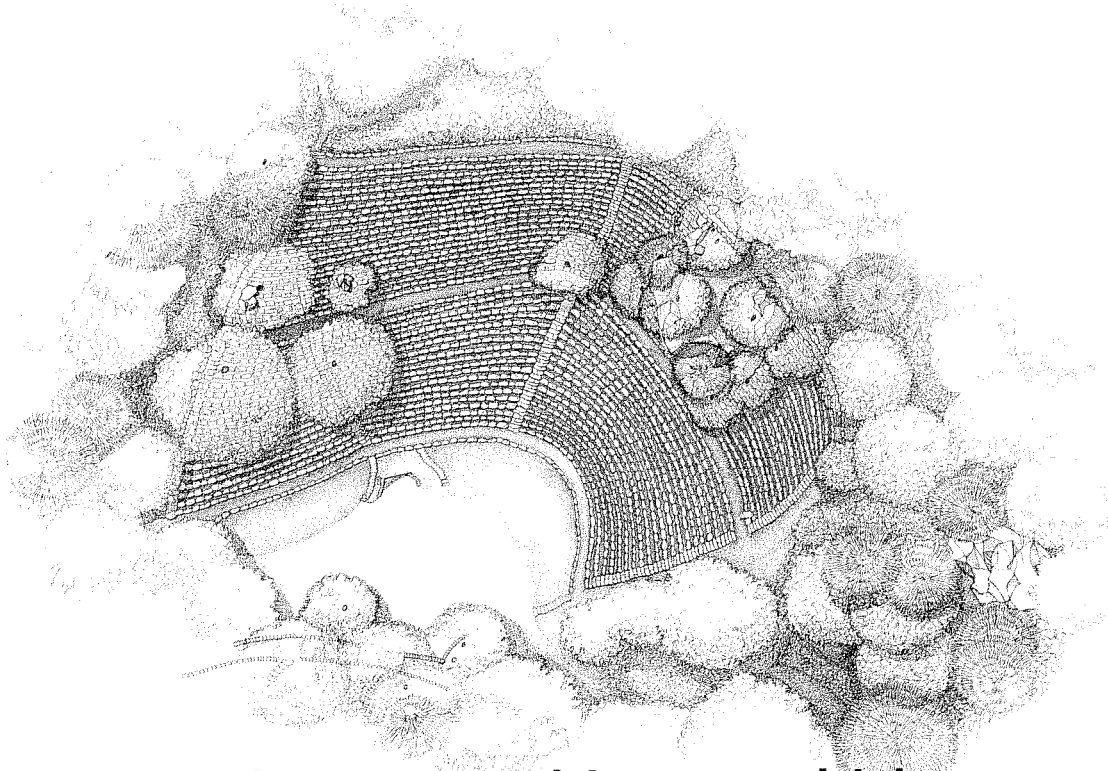
The stage and lower tiers of seating were constructed with minor modifications from the original design, but my recent field measurements indicate that the design of the upper seating tiers was changed substantially to accommodate bedrock and outcroppings that became intimate boxseats. The theater's long northern aisle focuses on one of these picturesque box seats before taking a sharp diversion around it. The original design's consistent 1: 3 slope was adjusted in the top tiers to steeper slopes to avoid bedrock, thus giving the theater's profile a distinctive bend that is immediately apparent as one enters.

It is the distortions of the "perfect" geometries of the original proposal that give the theater its visual excitement and highlight the rugged, spiritual character of the natural site, making it a place that visitors return to again and again. The only interruption of the annual Easter observance was between 1942 and 1945, when the army occupied the site. Today the theater accommodates not only the sunrise service, but also dramas, musical events, graduations and weddings.

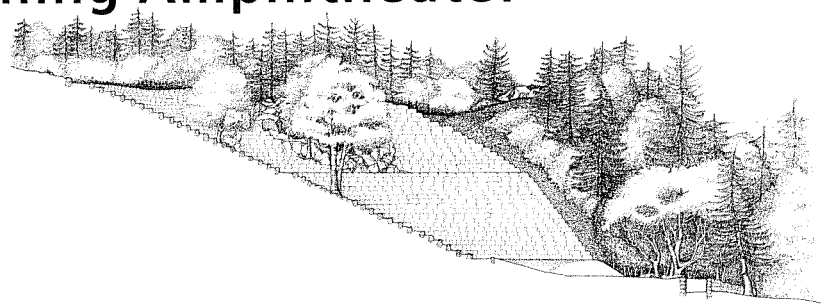
Plan and section of Mt. Helix Theater, as built. Courtesy Linda Jewell.
Below: Mt. Helix Theater under construction, 1925. Courtesy San Diego Historical Society, Union-Tribune photograph.
Bottom: Mt. Helix Theater, 1994. Courtesy Anton Grassl.







Sidney B. Cushing Amphitheater



Location: South-southwest facing slope of Mount Tamalpais, Marin County, California, twelve miles north of San Francisco.
Elevation: 2,000.
Designers: Emerson Knight and Paul Holloway, landscape architects.
Construction dates: Site clearing and earthwork, 1913-29; rock seating, 1934-41.
Seating: Up to 6,000, but presently restricted to 3,750.

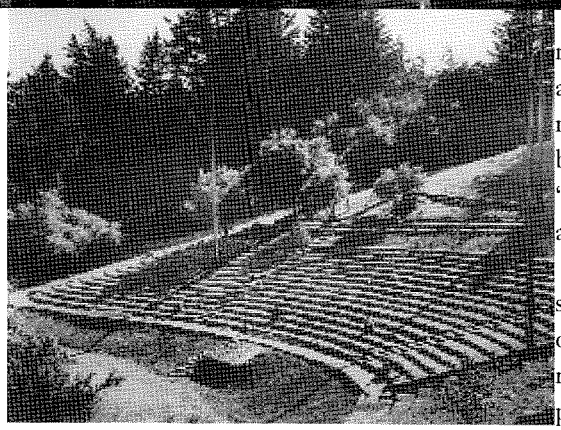
In the early 1900s, hiking at Mt. Tamalpais was a popular Bay Area pastime, fueled by a national conservation movement and magazine articles praising the virtues of nature and healthy outdoor activities as an escape from city congestion. Three hikers discovered the exceptional acoustics of a bowl-shaped Mount Tam site in 1912. They immediately began planning an event that would include a hike to the site, a picnic and an open-air drama.

On May 13, 1913, 1,200 people hiked either the eight miles from Mill Valley or the one mile from the railroad stop to see the first mountain play, *Abraham and Isaac*. This first performance was deemed a success and the Mountain Play Association was formed to present a play annually. Over the next 12 years, brush clearings were the only improvements made to the site, even though the steep slopes of both stage and auditorium created challenging operating conditions.

In 1925, shortly after Mt. Helix was dedicated, Emerson Knight began designing the Mt. Tamalpais Mountain Theater. Serious construction on the scheme did not begin until 1934 when the site was donated to the state and the Civilian Conservation Corps began to build the stone seats.

Knight was inspired by Greek theaters' implied association with democracy, their simplicity and their classic symmetry. At the same time, his focus on maintaining the existing character and structure of the site's contorted topography is clear. His scheme stretches the traditional semicircular Greek theater horizontally across the site while maintaining the focus on a flat, essentially symmetrical, stage. Because two steep ravines had criss-crossed the stage area, this move required considerable fill and stone retaining walls — a clear indication of Knight's willingness to manipulate the site to meet his design intentions.

But the schematic proposal also plays homage to the natural structure of the site. The auditorium seating, rather than continuing the ovoid shape of the stage, tapers into the existing topography to avoid the end wall that would have been necessary to complete the symmetry. The plan also has subtle warps and bends that reflect the locations of the steeper slopes and the drainage ravines. And



Plan and section of Syndey B. Cushing Amphitheater, as built. Courtesy Linda Jewell. Top: Syndey B. Cushing Amphitheater, 1994. Courtesy Anton Grassl. Left: Mt. Tamalpais theater under construction. Courtesy Special Collections, College of Environmental Design Library, University of California, Berkeley.

the gracefully curving rows are interrupted by native oaks and protruding rock formations.

Recent field measurements and air photos of the as-built theater make it apparent that the distortions of the Greek theater plan became much more pronounced through field adjustments during construction. Although the final organization of forty rows of seats, three horizontal aisles and four curved vertical aisles remains similar to the schematic plan, the seat widths, seat heights and vertical slopes vary in profile to accomodate the topography. The upper tiers of seats, instead of following a consistent elevation, move up and down with the natural slope, creating undulations in the horizontal bands of stone to demarcate the location of the old ravine and drainage swales. The subtle warping towards the site's filled drainage ravine became an axis that reorients the seating around the old ravine and creates an assymetrical stage.

Under the direction of Knight and CCC landscape architect Paul Holloman the seating was constructed over a four year period. Workers carefully located 600- to 2,000-pound local stones that had two weathered surfaces at right angles to one another to provide flat seats and vertical risers for the terraced seats. Knight was adament that stones should not be cut so that a character of "age-old ruggedness" was not compromised. More than half of their stones' bulk is below grade to avoid using cement binder giving "the feeling that the structure will remain secure and intact for centuries."

Today visitors approach this extraordinary structure from the top, looking down onto rows of irregularly sized stone that blend with the surrounding landscape and do not distract from the powerful distant views. As one moves down to take a seat, the sweeping, curved geometry of the terraced seats provides a sharp contrast to the rugged natural terrain — a contrast punctuated by the protrusion of angular rock outcrops and picturesque native oaks into the graceful arcs. As one descends to the stage and looks back to the auditorium, the view is of an imposing stack of horizontal stone bands that gracefully dip downward to reveal the location of the old drainage ravine.

This choreography highlights both the strength of the concept's idealized geometry and the ability of the landscape to mold this geometry into an experience that heightens our understanding of the site. The reflective viewer leaves with the confidence that human culture and nature can not only coexist but also enhance each other.

References

Sean Carroll, "Mt. Helix Nature Theatre — A Gift to Us All," in *Lookout Avenue* (La Mesa Historical Society Newsletter, May 1990).

Sheldon Cheney, *The Open Air Theater* (New York: M. Kennerly, 1918).

Lincoln Fairley, *Mount Tamalpais: A History* (San Francisco: Scottwall Associates, 1987).

Emerson Knight, "Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais," in *Landscape Architecture Quarterly* (October 1959): 5-9.

Emerson Knight, "Outdoor Theaters and Stadiums in the West," *The Architect and Engineer* (August 1924): 53-91.

Emerson Knight, "The Mount Helix Nature Theater," in *A Book of Memories for the Ages* (Dedication Publication, 1925).

Richard Requa, "My Greatest Opportunity," in *A Book of Memories for the Ages* (Dedication Publication, 1925).

Frank Waugh, *Outdoor Theaters* (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1917).