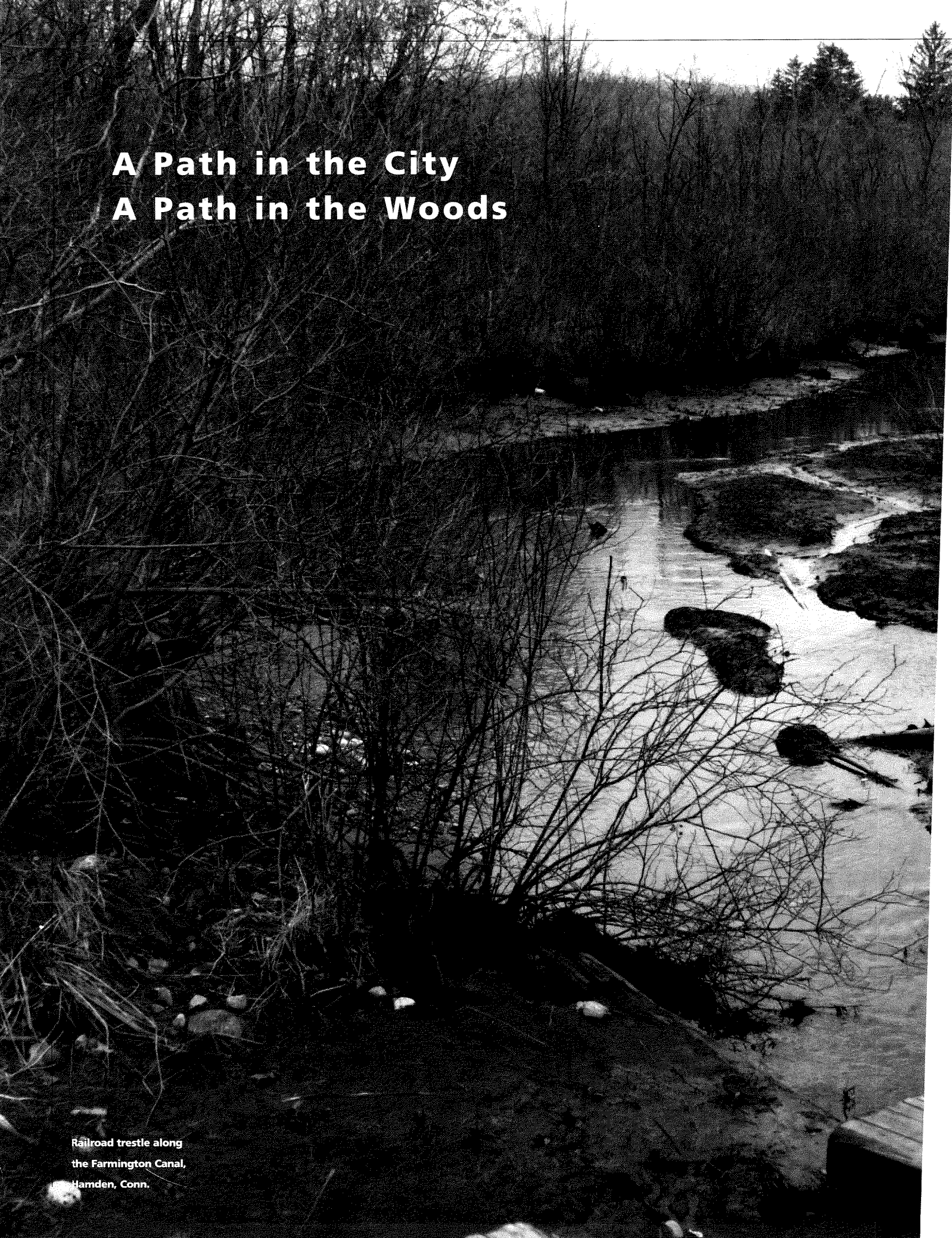
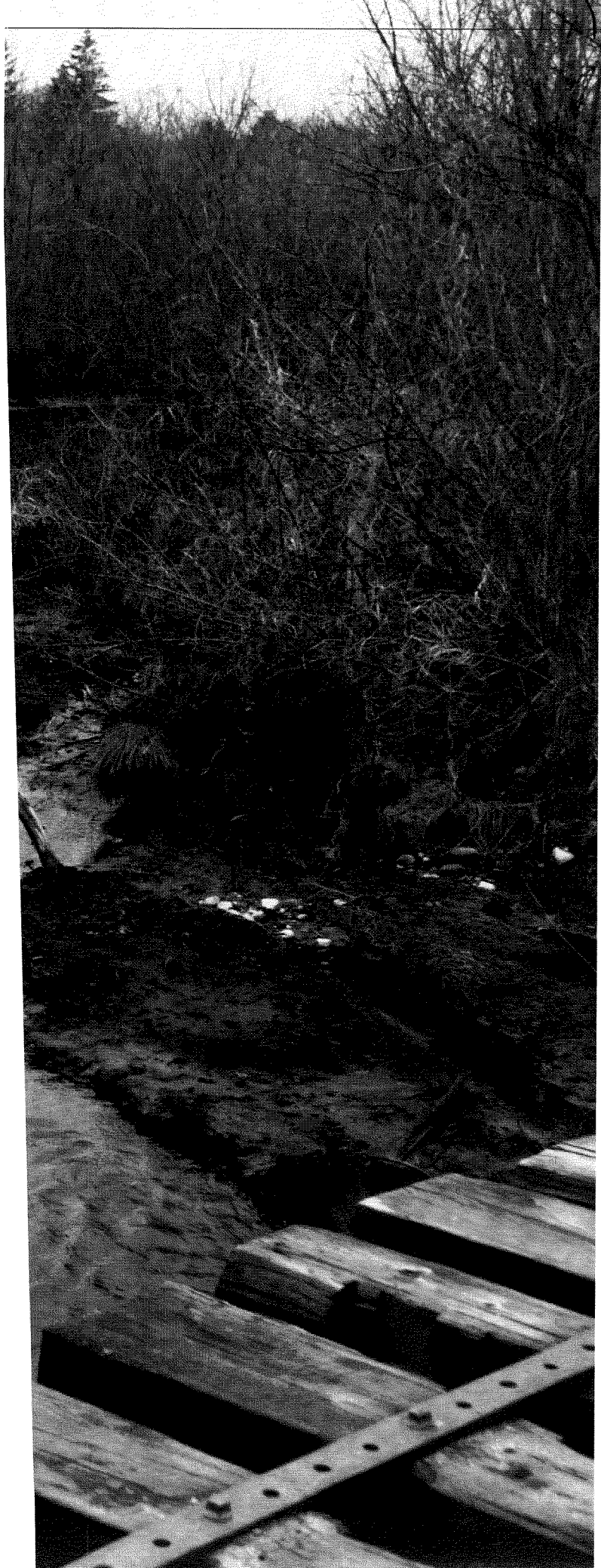
A Path in the City
A Path in the Woods



Railroad trestle along the Farmington Canal, Hamden, Conn.



The Farmington Canal in Connecticut is an example of a landscape for modern America.

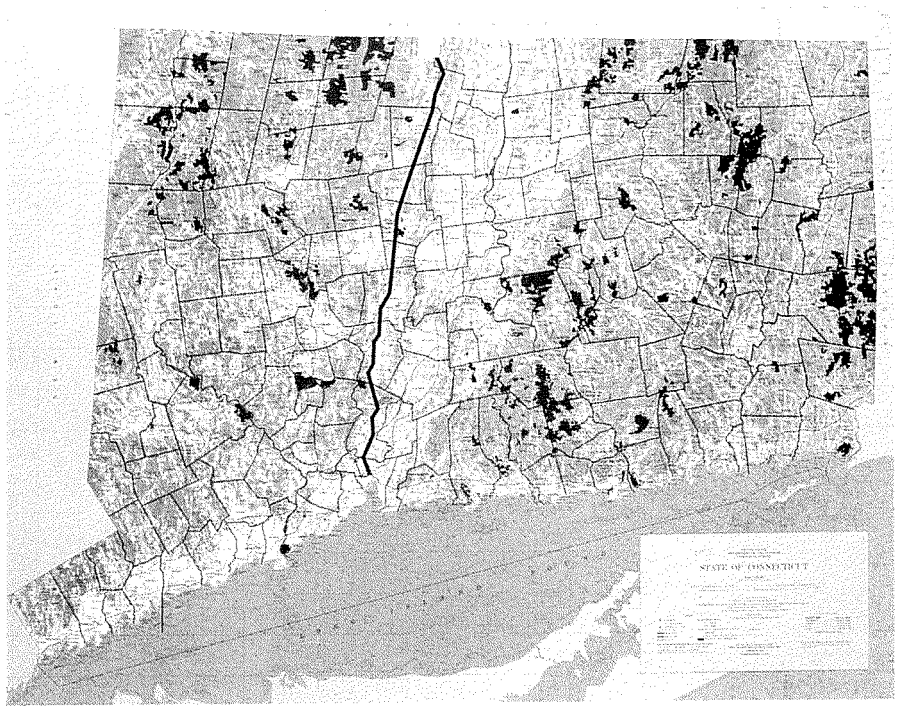
It is a 25-foot to 100-foot wide corridor that runs through downtown New Haven, through the campus of Yale University, through neighborhoods of different ethnic, social and racial composition, and out into the suburbs. It was first used for a canal, which was abandoned, and then for a railroad, also abandoned.

There is now an opportunity for redefining the corridor's role in terms appropriate to the twentieth century. Local governments are purchasing almost 15 miles of the route, or easements along it, in New Haven and the outlying communities of Hamden and Chesire.

The challenge is that the corridor passes through many communities, each of which has different expectations about how the corridor can serve its needs. This poses the question of how a continuous corridor can be woven out of such diverse parts.

The corridor also presents an opportunity to shape a new kind of American city. Just as the high-speed rail corridor from Boston to Washington is becoming the spine of a Northeastern megacity, this abandoned canal and railroad corridor can be the spine of a linear city at a different scale. It can unite downtowns, neighborhoods, small towns and parks that have become isolated in our increasingly diffuse, auto-oriented landscape. It can forge new connections at a scale defined by slower forms of movement, such as walking and bicycle riding.

What follows are excerpts from a discussion among a dozen professionals—architects, landscape architects, writers on landscape, artists and a cultural geographer—who were posed with the following question: Looking at the corridor from your own professional point of view, what is indispensible in the way we ought to go



Path of the Farmington Canal and railroad corridor through Connecticut. Courtesy Diana Balmori.

about its design today? The object of the discussion was to identify, by talking about the Farmington Canal, key issues involved in designing a landscape.

The discussion was part of a larger series of conversations, called "Cold Spring Two," that grew out of a concern that it was time for the profession to re-explore its role and to plot a future course for landscape design. The concern was not only that landscape had begun to interest other design professions, but also that the landscape profession itself was becoming interested in theoretical issues.

Earlier in the symposium, the participants wrestled with the problem of defining landscape in terms relevant to today's design work. The nub of the debate was whether it is possible to separate the natural from the artificial in the landscape. This part of the discussion is summarized in a short essay focused around the question of whether a path in the woods is artificial or natural.

The theoretical issue of what relationship with nature will inform landscape design is critical. Shifts in our relationship with nature and our understanding of it are expressed first, perhaps, in the landscape.

One way of forcing the issue is to tackle a design in a particular place with a particular set of problems that nevertheless have a general applicability. This was what we hoped to accomplish in the two days of conversations, which led from a path in the woods to a path in the city.

"Cold Spring Two," was convened by Diana Balmori in conjunction with the Architectural League of New York and Dumbarton Oaks in May, 1989. "A Path in the City" is an edited transcript of discussions that took place on the second day of the symposium. "A Path in the Woods" is a reflection on discussions that took place on the first day of the symposium.

The first day of discussions was held under the auspices of the Round Tables in Landscape Architecture program at Dumbarton Oaks, organized by John Dixon Hunt, Director of Studies in Landscape Architecture. Participants were: Marina Adams, landscape architect; Gerald Allen, architect, Gerald Allen & Associates; William Burch, professor of natural resource management, Yale University; Warren Byrd, Chair,

Division of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia; William Cronon, professor of history, Yale University; Rosalie Genevro, Executive Director, Architectural League of New York; Frances Halsband, FAIA, architect, R.M. Kliment & Frances Halsband; Catherine Howett, landscape architect and professor, University of Georgia; Hunt; Peirce Lewis, professor of geography, Penn State University; Naomi Miller, Professor of Art History, Boston University; Susan Nelson; Mark Simon, FAIA, architect, Centerbrook Architects; Barbara Solomon, artist and landscape designer; and Elyn Zimmerman, sculptor.

Overhead view of model of the corridor's path through New Haven.
Courtesy Diana Balmori.

Maintaining a Trace

Frances Halsband: You absolutely should not erase all traces of what was once there. Maintaining some visual reference to the fact that this was once a railroad line and a canal is imperative. We need to have some connection—I am hesitant to say this first because it sounds as if I am interested only in history, and I do not mean that. As architects, we too often erase all traces and start over as though we are the first ones ever to have been on a site. I do not think that is good for the culture at large, even though it is a lot of fun.

Gerald Allen: Is it never good? That kind of categorical claim that it is never appropriate bothers me.

Halsband: In this place it is an absolute good. If we were out in a field or forest, I would not give that answer.

Barbara Solomon: How much of a trace?

Halsband: That is where the art comes in. You could have any kind of poetic evocation of this thing.

Warren Byrd: Are you to retain a memory of the corridor's form or of its use?

Halsband: I am not going to tell you how to do it. That is your art, your poetry.

Byrd: The difficulty is in overcoming nostalgia. What would typically happen is somebody would take an old locomotive and put it off to the side and paint it black or red.

Halsband: We do not want to see big locomotives painted black or red and sitting out there, but a trace could be a pretty slight thing.

William Cronon: There has been a U.S. Forest Service policy for more than a decade to remove all human structures, all construction within wilderness areas. The question of whether that is good is creating a very lively controversy right now.

This is probably most interestingly being played out in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, in the wilderness area called Great Gulf, one of the most historic hiking areas in North America. People have been visiting there for a century and a half seeking an outdoor experience, and they have been constructing buildings, paths and bridges there as well. In most other contexts we would try to preserve that long history; yet the imperative of a category called wilderness is in this case trumping the category called human artifact.

Allen: I can still imagine that there might be cases in which you would want to obliterate the past entirely. I would feel more comfortable if we were to say that one ought to look at what the past was, try to understand it and see if some of it is worth keeping for current purposes.

Byrd: Somebody has to make value judgements along the way. That is where decisions about what to keep get tricky.

Allen: But surely the value system would begin by knowing what it was, knowing what you are dealing with and knowing what to do. Nobody would argue against doing that.

Halsband: Well, we all agree that not to think of the history at all is bad. Follow your own lights once you have thought of it.

Following Ian McHarg

Catherine Howett: The beginning of being able to create a good design for this complex system is to know it as thoroughly as possible. We would have to look closely at all of the givens—the topography and the vegetation, the wildlife, hydrology and the role that this place plays in the larger systems of the city and possibly of the region. I guess a kind of McHargian analysis would have to be a starting place.

Warren Byrd: That is a typical starting point from landscape architecture's perspective, the site analysis. What is interesting to me about that is how relatively blindly we do that now. We automatically do it in any project, yet each project is so different that it is not of the same value or desirability in each case.

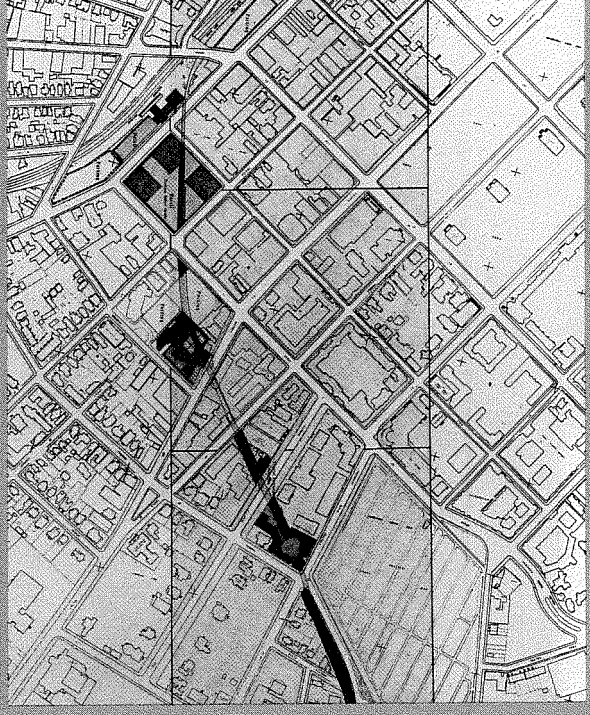
I have always liked Kevin Lynch's definition of why you do site analysis, which is that you do it for a particular purpose. You have to know why or to what end that particular piece of land is going to be used. Otherwise you waste time doing a lot of analysis that is not so important.

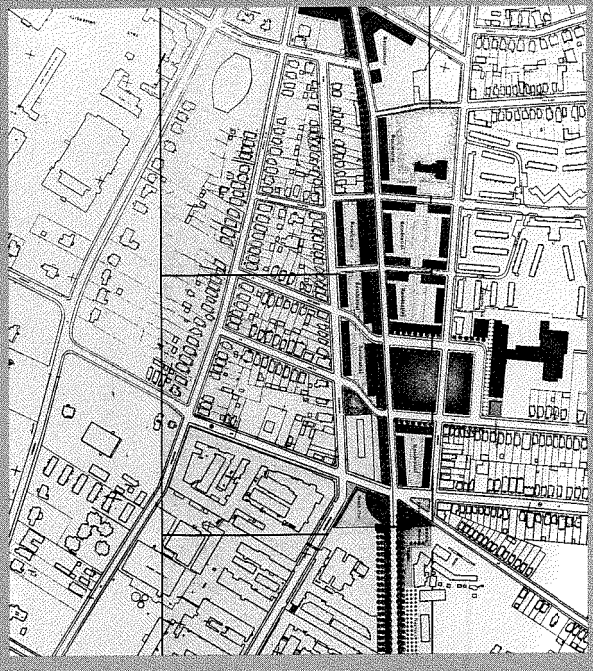
Howett: I would hesitate very much to see it put aside as a methodology. But, as a profession we have never examined what is the basis of the evaluation: How do we assess the importance of any of those pieces of information? McHarg leaves us in the lurch. It's not enough to place all those layers of information on top of one another and look down on them.

Byrd: Well, that is giving everything an equal value. There have been other methods developed that give more weight to some qualities than others. But even so, it starts to remove you from the art of designing. What I object to most about that approach is the premise that the design would come out of this pure analysis.

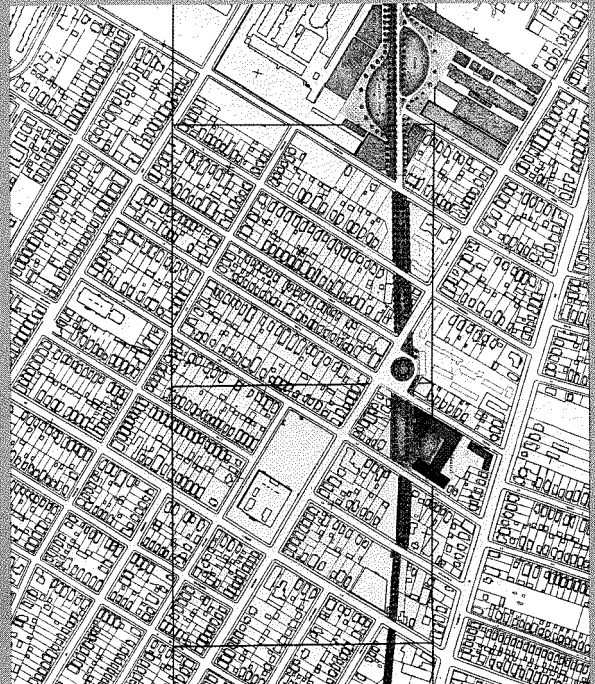
Gerald Allen: Site analysis is meant to be an analytical tool, not a design

Proposal for design of the corridor within New Haven. Courtesy Diana Balmori.





The corridor passes through New Haven commercial and residential districts. Courtesy Diana Balmori.



tool. That is the sort of thing that happens when architects prepare a functional relationship diagram of the building, and all of a sudden it becomes the plan, which is absurd because you can take any functional relationship diagram and make 50 different plans out of it, all of them quite different from each other.

Byrd: Take this project, for example. Because it is completely manipulated land, a lot of the basic natural information is of less importance here.

Allen: And an awful lot you can simply know instantly.

Looking for Comparisons

Naomi Miller: The history of the site and the purpose it once served seems like the starting point. But I think I am less nostalgic in some way and I would look to more recent models.

I cannot help but think of this problem in terms of the Southwest Corridor Park, which was built in Boston and is incredibly successful. Not too many people in Boston even know of it or go there. It is about three-quarters of a mile long and has a different width at different points, from about 25 meters up to a city block. All traces of its former function have been banished. But there is a wonderful variety of terrain, vegetation and usage. It connects Tent City (a very controversial proposition to begin with) and the Back Bay Station, then goes on to Massachusetts Avenue. It goes through so many different socio-economic strata that you wonder how it could succeed.

Frances Halsband: But you could tell they kept the line where it was.

Miller: Yes, but the line changes. You cannot see a direct line because the path has been so designed and is so varied. You go there and you have to ask, what has been here before?

It is a puzzling park when you visit it for the first time. You are not sure whom it is serving, what it is, or what it is connecting. Suddenly you are going off into the South End. Suddenly there is a basketball court. The corridor's lack of clarity and purpose is interesting, but it is not exactly welcoming if you do not know where you are.

There has to be some kind of a definition to make a park like that used. It is too non-specific and it serves too many different groups. One does not know what exactly is going to happen over time.

Warren Byrd: Isn't that part of the essential dilemma of a park that exists to make or preserve open space, but does not have enough values assigned to it to draw people for a specific purpose?

Miller: Exactly. An open space is only important where you have a certain density, and it is going to be used. And so far the few times I have been to the Southwest Corridor Park, I have noticed that it is very underused.

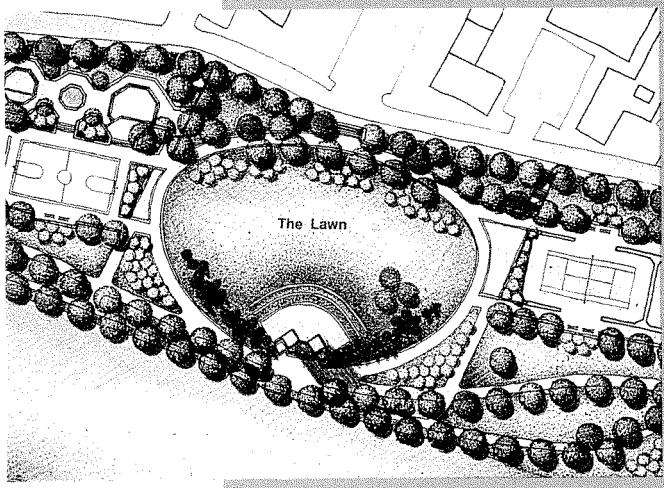
Peirce Lewis: Does the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal inform this problem?

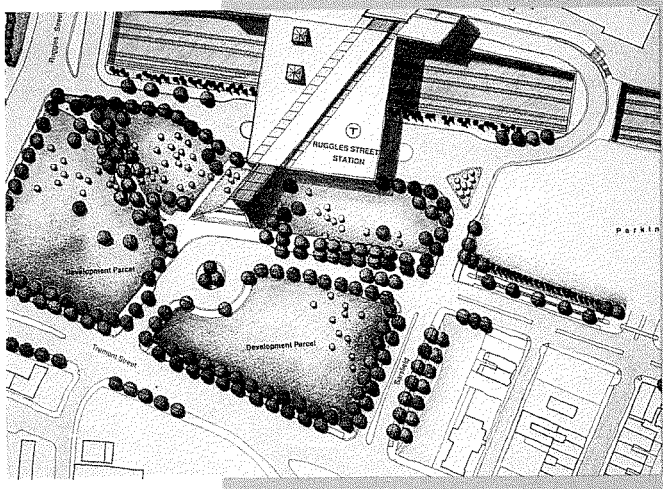
Diana Balmori: Yes, since it also has a very urban section. A very interesting thing about the C & O Canal is how it has been able to generate a new life around itself, although it is not truly working as a canal any longer.

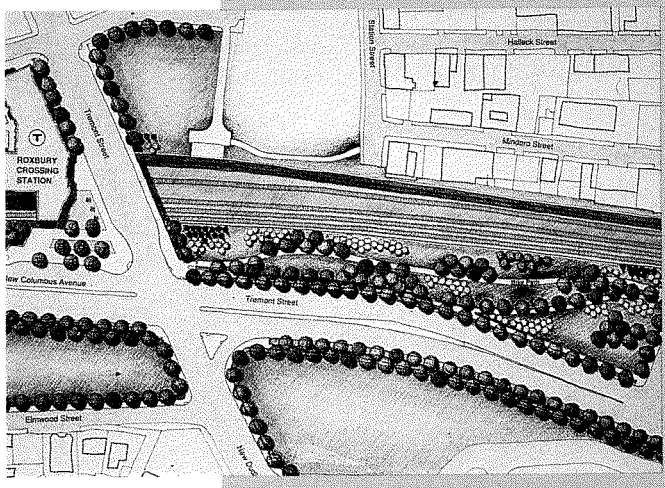
In the Connecticut case, the corridor attracted a whole set of activities; for example, munitions factories sprouted up along the line when it was a canal. The working-class neighborhoods along the line feel that when the railroad was working and the canal was working and all that industry was generated along the corridor, those were good times.

Byrd: There is also a 50-mile-long converted railroad corridor from Alexandria out to somewhere way out in the farmland, that was converted over the past ten years. It seems to be wildly successful and it cuts through all sorts of different conditions and towns. It is just simply for bicycling and walking. They were going to incorporate equestrian, but that got to be a conflict. I think the beauty of it is people can take it for the full duration, which very few people do obviously, or take it for little jaunts on the weekends.

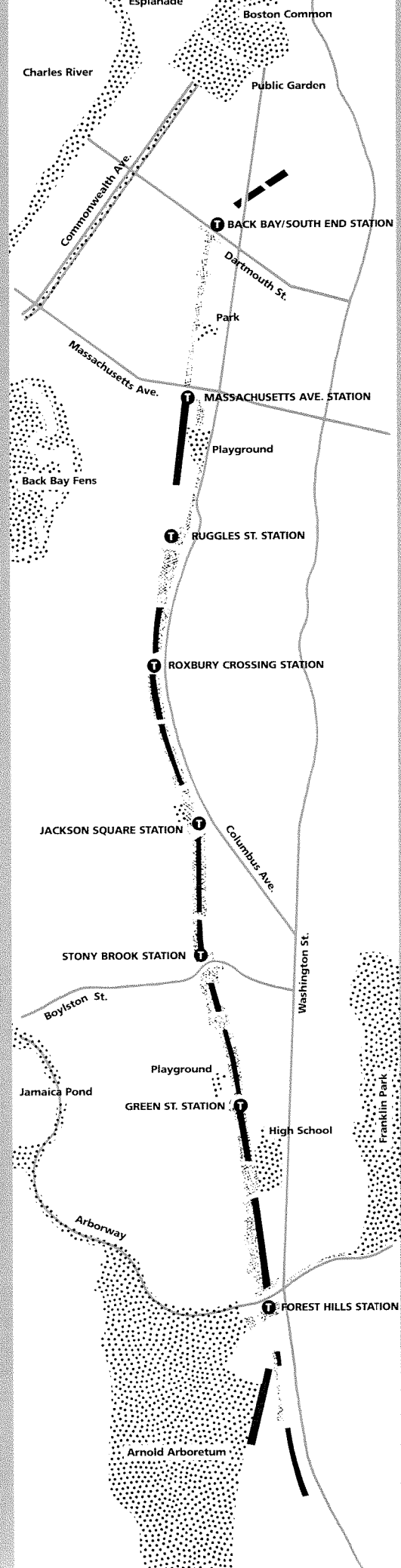
Path of Boston's Southwest Corridor Park, which runs outward from South End Station.







Detail of Southwest Corridor Park plan.
Courtesy Sasaki Associates.



The Corridor as an Archetype

Peirce Lewis: Why are you intervening in this process to begin with? What is your purpose? What do you perceive as your task?

William Cronon: One circumstance is that the railroad company that owns the land wants to sell it off and parcel it, so that the line will be lost unless there's some dramatic intervention justifying its continued existence as a line.

This is very much a generic railroad problem, so there is an urgency about figuring it out. Is there a value, an imperative in preserving these old corridors, and if so, what is it?

The Corridor as a Historic Document

Peirce Lewis: I don't look at this railroad line as something that should be manipulated or designed. I look at it as a piece of evidence, part of a larger matrix of material. In aggregation we call this material landscape, cultural landscape, which I see as an exceedingly complicated historic document.

Because of the importance of communication and transportation in the evolution of North Atlantic culture, I see this railroad right-of-way as an extraordinarily powerful piece of information that we need to know about if we are going to know about ourselves. It is a way of looking at our culture, which conventional written documents do not allow us to do.

I would fall back on conventional geographic terminology. We talk about the study of places and distinguish between site and situation, site being the actual real estate and situation being the location of something in a larger context. I think one must talk about that railroad right-of-way in the context of the culture and society in which it was created, for which it was created and which it inevitably altered.

This corridor should not be parcelled off because it is a unique, irrevocable piece of information about ourselves, our society and the way we came to be the folk that we are, for better or for worse, but without making value judgements about whether we are good or bad people, or whether this is a good or bad railroad line. It is a railroad line and it happens to be intact. To allow it to be chopped up into parcels would be equivalent, I suppose, of turning the National Cathedral into a festival mall.

Catherine Howett: You can document the corridor, put it in a book; you can put bronze plaques up where it was. But the idea that you ought to save it because it is a bit of canal and railroad history is very radical.

Topography and Economy

Warren Byrd: One of the fascinating things about railroads is that the site has to be so level, so flat, that it just carves its way through an uneven landscape. I would be interested in the way it does that, either in a very topographic way or just by carving its way through neighborhoods. And I would try to pick up on that if it exists; I would also be interested in sing the metaphor of a river as a system or a corridor that moves through several communities of different types and around which the communities organize themselves.

Rosalie Genevro: Besides that, it seems this kind of project offers a perfect opportunity to make another kind of statement. Railroads, while they were economically progressive and moved the country along, were also an incredibly brutal act on the land when they were first planned, through the very act of making the bed level.

Byrd: That could be very interesting under the right circumstances, where you have a combination of preserving part of what the railroad was culturally, and yet reclaiming some of the land as it might have been before the railroad carved its way through.

William Cronon: As far as the wasteful use of the land, actually I picture the railroad as the least wasteful of all the major transportation means, certainly compared to the automobile.

Gerald Allen: One of the things that makes the railroad in New Haven so hard to work with is the fact that it is so economical and so tucked away that makes it hard to use as a public space.

The corridor assumes a rural character in Hamden, less than 10 miles from central New Haven.
Courtesy Diana Balmori.

Recording the Past Will Change the Future

William Cronon: Were I to tackle the problem of trying to design something back into this corridor, at the forefront of my mind would be change: Change in the past and the present and in the future. I would also have a didactic purpose because in addition to being a historian, I am an academic. I would want to teach people moving through this corridor something about the diversity of pasts and peoples that this line represented.

We historians look at everything around us as documents that we read in order to figure out what the past looked like. We do that not out of nostalgia for any particular moment in the past, but as a sort of continuing record of change. What happens in all landscape is change.

What is interesting about this corridor is that it was a failed canal that then became a railroad, which was moderately successful. The railroad's intention was to create a deep hinterland. For New Haven that would be akin to the hinterland that New York and Boston and Providence had. But New Haven never really succeeded, it never became the great industrial center that the designers of that railroad would have wanted it to be, and now this corridor has become an abandoned strip of land.

It is important to understand something about both this strip of land and the city. People moving through the corridor can learn something not only about the past geography of this community but also about the social geography of the present, and that raises questions about the future.

The diversity of communities through which the line passes is a reflection of the diversity of the history through which the city itself passed. There is a stretch early on in the line that is lined with a whole series of factory buildings and foundries built in the first half of the nineteenth century. It would be great somehow to represent their relationships to the water that once existed in that corridor. Other stretches are lined by what were clearly railroad factories, which have a very different relationship to the land.

The question is, can one preserve the diversity of change that is represented by the corridor and not lose track of the simplicity of the line itself? My utopian use of the land would be to turn it into a streetcar corridor. This would preserve the function the corridor always had while maintaining the relationship to leisure, or to people, that a park is supposed to have.

This idea has all sorts of interesting social consequences. The danger, which is I think the hardest problem —and it is not a historical imperative so much as a political and economic imperative — is that whatever you do with the corridor is going to change the class composition of the communities along this line.

Suppose we turn it into a streetcar corridor. Instantly, you would have the beginning of gentrification along that line, particularly wherever the streetcar stops were. It would begin to reproduce streetcar suburbs.

In a sense, I am drawn to the gentrification consequences. Streetcar suburbs, to my mind, are the most benign of American urban forms. I would rather live in a streetcar suburb than in an automobile suburb of the twentieth century because of the close sense of community that streetcar neighborhoods created.

But in another sense that is what the black neighborhoods have every reason to fear from innovations designers are likely to produce. That comes back to this question: Is there any way to freeze the social geography of the corridors so that you do not bring about class conflict?

I do not think there is. But that means we really have to regard ourselves as social imperialists who are like the urban planners of the '50s and '60s moving out black neighborhoods, putting them in somewhere else so that the middle-class could reclaim districts for itself.

That would be the very likely consequence because the urban corridor, as a biking and pedestrian corridor, is a middle-class corridor, nine times out of ten.

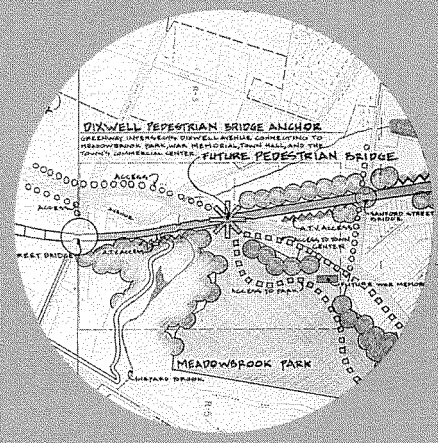
Focal Point, Connector, or Edge?

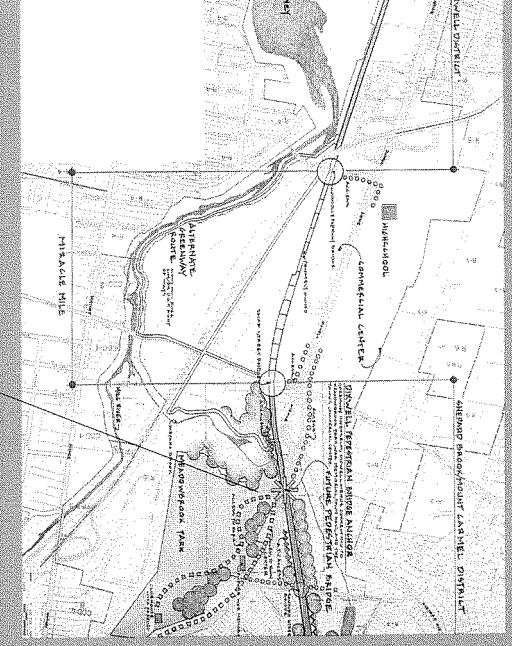
Gerald Allen: Parks and open spaces usually have been focal points, more or less in the center of individual neighborhoods, and places to which all the community comes. The question is, is a linear form essentially a wrong form for a park?

Warren Byrd: The issue concerns territoriality and who feels ownership.

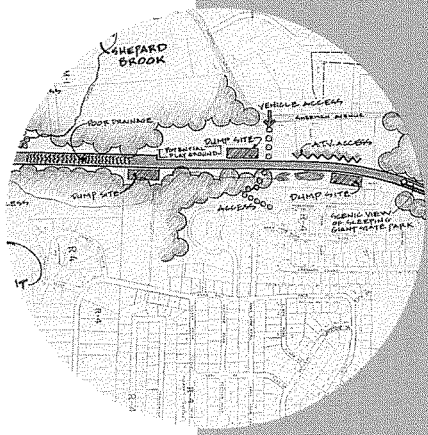
Naomi Miller: This corridor is really almost an edge, and it is trying to bring together different sections of the city as in Boston, where the South End feeds into the Back Bay and there are meeting points.

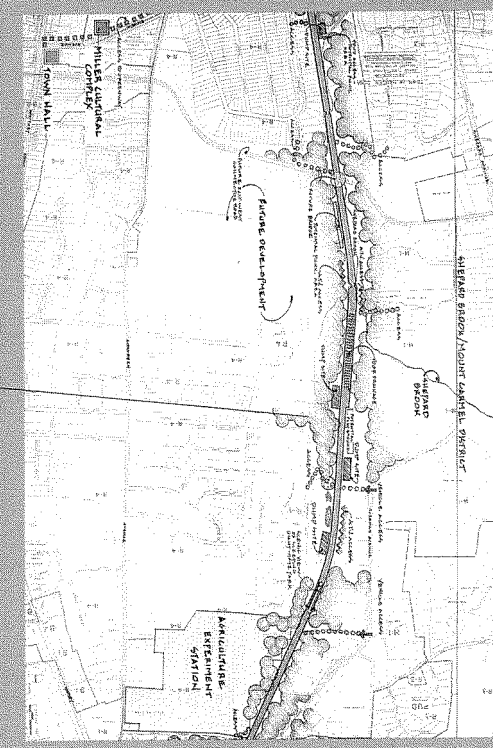
William Cronon: The problem is confronting the separation of different neighborhoods and trying to do something about that. It is like breaking down barriers.

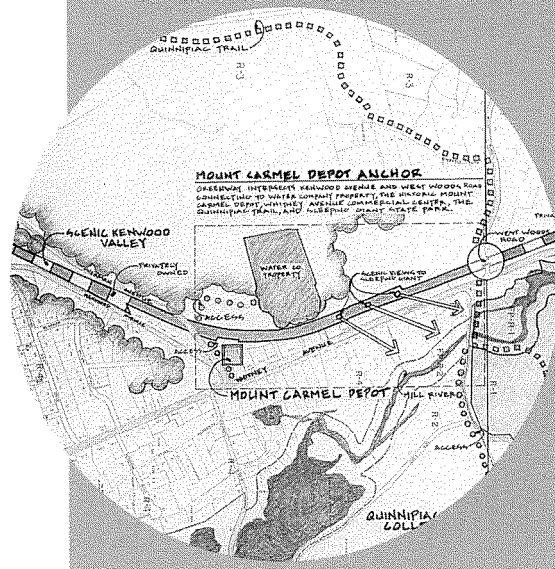


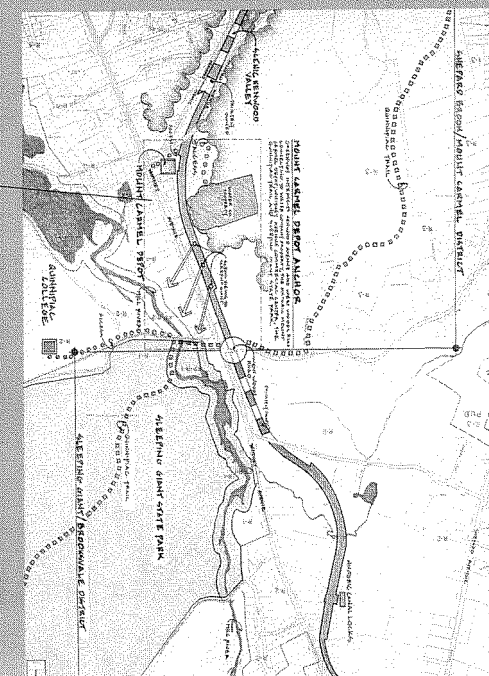


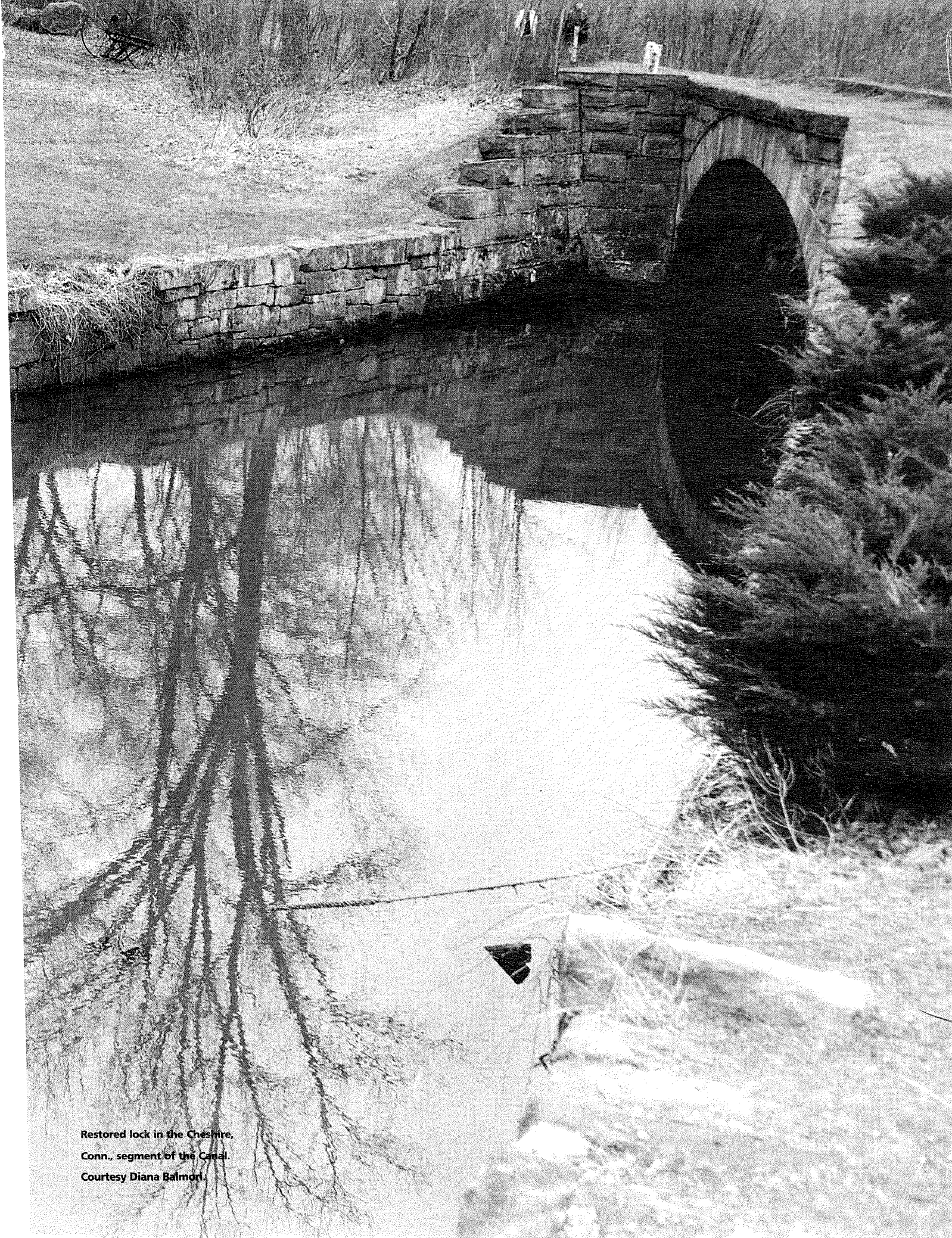
Proposal for design of the six-mile long corridor segment in Hamden.
Courtesy Diana Balmori.











Restored lock in the Cheshire, Conn., segment of the Canal. Courtesy Diana Balmori.

Park or Boulevard? A Question of Sociability and Safety

Diana Balmori: There are many organizations in Connecticut that have already stated what they want this corridor to be. Some want it as an open space recreation corridor that allows people to move on foot and by bike along it. They see it as a continuous corridor, on which, eventually, you could go from New Haven, Conn., to Northhampton, Mass.

Warren Byrd: Were there common denominators? Did everybody agree on walking and bicycling or not?

Balmori: People along one particular section want a road through the corridor. The walkway and biking would be something secondary to be done along the road's sidewalk. People along another want the corridor to be for walking, mainly because they feel that it could connect people in their own neighborhood.

I found little interest in turning the corridor into a park as such, but the moment I started talking about it becoming urban and more like a boulevard than a park, everybody became interested. The more paved and the more urban I described it, the more people responded to it. This applies to city officials, as well as the two black neighborhoods through which the corridor passes. They associated safety with boulevards and danger with parks.

Byrd: It also sounds more social, in a way, when you talk about a boulevard. It is more about community.

Balmori: And about city. What the blacks objected to most was the idea of an Adirondack-type trail running through their neighborhoods.

Naomi Miller: You rarely see a black person on the Southwest Corridor Park. I do not think I ever have.

William Cronon: A boulevard is a bright-light district and hence desirable because the bright lights are associated with safety. Also, I think, a boulevard is historically closer to the function of that corridor. The corridor has never been a recreational space. It was always a central spine of the city, and so a light rail line with some kind of commercial use that does not destroy the leisure potential of the corridor would be in my mind actually historically appropriate.

Gerald Allen: It also may be formally appropriate, which is the point I was trying to raise about the Southwest Corridor Park.

Catherine Howett: Although people are saying the historic remnant has a value, the new value is that these corridors become opportunities to introduce nature or green space into a downtown area.

Cronon: What I would deeply regret is ending up with a paved road, which can easily be a highway that would destroy all the opportunities that are there. The art, the designer's challenge is to mix these functions in a way that does not destroy the park.

The real problem is that it is socially utopian for someone to think they can create a benign, safe corridor through that particular strip of land, unless we revolutionize the city.

A Microcosm of American Diveristy

Susan Nelson: This particular problem to me is uniquely American. This railroad corridor is sort of a microcosm of America, a country where various groups and different things are connected together.

It is difficult to be a designer in this country because there are so many different groups of people and value systems. You have to be dealing with that constantly. Our history is one of trying to resolve things among different groups. We try to have one value system; we have a Constitution and feelings about liberty and justice and that is what unites us all. But as individuals we have so many distinct value systems. So a challenge for a corridor is to tie all these together.

It would be important to clarify the purpose of the corridor or to be very simple about its intention. The C & O Canal is beautiful in its simplicity; there are not a lot of different purposes being applied to that corridor. It is a very open space that is clearly recreational and serves a need people in the city may have for a place to get out and walk or ride a bicycle.

Designing from Desire

Barbara Solomon: Instead of all these "oughts" why not have desires? People should not forget to play. Your desires can be as strong as your oughts.

My desire would be to turn it back into a canal, with bars on both sides. Whoever wanted recreation could have that it in each different place.

Catherine Howett: That raises the question, whose desires?

Solomon: I have found that if somebody has a very strong desire other people catch it. That is what artists find very often. If artists have a great desire to do something, everybody loves it and then they are very proud of it and they adore it. And they do not damage or vandalize it.

Frances Halsband: This is very important. I think a lot of what we hear as the wants and needs of the community are just...

Solomon: ...oughts, oughts, oughts.

Halsband: You go to people and they do not know what to say, so they try and think up something. The most disconnected people in the community are often the ones that come and speak out at these meetings. If you ask somebody to have an opinion, well sure, they will rise to the occasion and have an opinion. But if you have a real vision you can get people to go along with it.

Naomi Miller: There is education potential in a problem like this when you have an opportunity to work with people. People do not automatically have desires, and so you try to give them some idea of the possibilities.

Diana Balmori: The professional puts in a visual, understandable form a series of options that help people think more broadly about the problem. People might come up with something that is totally fresh and new from just being shown a series of options that they have not been able to make concrete because they have not been trained to make images.

But seeing several options immediately sets people thinking about possibilities and sometimes encourages people to re-combine those options or to produce new ones.

Peirce Lewis: But a sizeable number of the people whom you are addressing, or for whom you are going to be designing, are not going to be able to comprehend these images, no matter how simple a graphic is. And they are probably not going to come to your meetings either. The people who come to those meetings are the people who are going to be the most immediately affected by the project.

Allowing for Adaption

Diana Balmori: Perhaps designers should not ever intend to produce a fixed finished model, but rather understand that a landscape is something that is going to continue to change so that there is not a specific form that should be legislated and fixed.

Peirce Lewis: I must say that is one of the most encouraging things I have heard in the past several days, not just here but elsewhere. It seems to me there always has been a very strong tendency within the design profession to become totalitarian, to think that it knows best. Now I hear you say that you are going to allow for and, as a matter of fact, expect and are happy with this unintended landscape. This pleases me endlessly.

Making Room for Change

Diana Balmori: Landscape by its very nature deals with change. The fact that you are using living things and living elements makes you have to be able to think in terms of change over time. Architecture is not like that. It has a very finished moment. Although the building might age, it has a very clear finished moment.

A number of comments have proposed taking change as a principle of design, that is, allowing for change and designing for it. Perhaps this may be the starting point from which we are to envision the design activity in landscape: that it allows for change, it has no fixed moment, it will therefore be a moving target, that it starts off from a particular point, but it will continue to be something perhaps very different as it moves along.

Frances Halsband: That is the current dilemma in architecture as well, that there are no more grassy sites where you put up the perfect building. You are adding to or you are thinking about what comes next, and so I think it is the same.

Gerald Allen: Even as the landscape allows for change and in many ways is about change, it is also place. Landscape is not a thing. It is not the perfect building. It is a place. It is place and change equally.

Catherine Howett: The problem with that comparison is that it tends to make us identify landscape with organic nature. There are many building projects that ought to embrace the values of a commitment to an open-ended process, rather than to a finished master plan that puts most of the chips on values of form, composition, clear structure and organization that are meant to last and probably will.

But places that are enduring can incorporate change; making places enduring means people can come to them 10, 30, 80, 100 years later and still find value and still make it a part of their place.

Allen: It is arguable that the only way you can endure is by changing.

Howett: Actually, I was referring to the notion of autonomous architecture and the authority of the designer. There is a kind of arrogance in saying, I am planting this tree, and by damn, it better be here 300 years from now.

Allen: Nature has an amazing way of taking care of that, though.

Peirce Lewis: It certainly is not an ignoble mood, to want to plant a tree that is going to last 300 years. Isn't this part of the human condition to want to create something that is going to endure beyond our own life span?

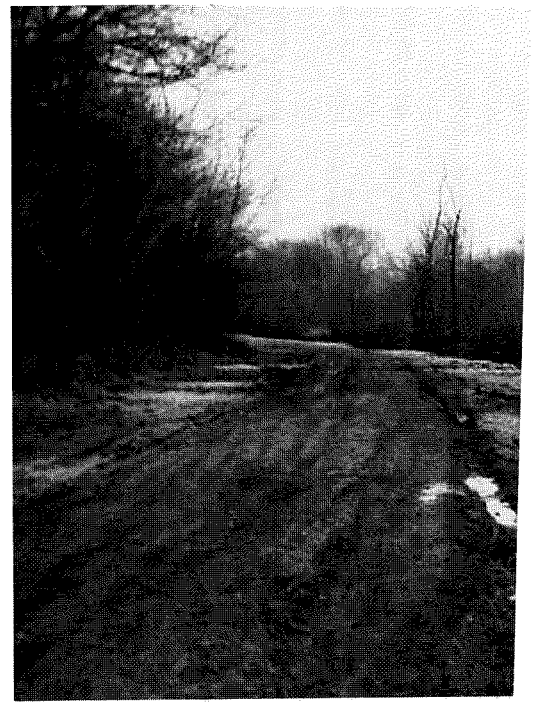
Warren Byrd: You want to plant this tree to last 300 years, but it is more again within that framework of whether the tree has a meaningful purpose or expresses some larger idea that can be potentially enduring.

William Cronon: Maybe it also is a question not only of planting a tree, but also whether you are going to create a space in which a tree could last for 300 years.

Allen: Maybe another thing to do is to make the place so nice that subsequent generations will want to help it endure, take up the torch.

Susan Nelson: That is where you hope that the decision to plant the tree is really reflecting a value among many people, not just the designer. That might be something more far reaching.

A Path in the Woods



Is Mimesis, or art as imitation of nature, still appropriate or possible in landscape design?

Until the twentieth century, mimesis was based on the concept that nature is radically distinct from human artifice. But our contemporary view of nature is different in two ways. First, we now perceive nature not as "out there" but as here in us; we are part of it. Second, there is no longer any place on earth where we can see the old kind of nature, that is, nature that humans have not touched or modified. Therefore, the aesthetic tradition of imitat-

Segment of the canal/railroad corridor in Cheshire. Courtesy Diana Balmori.

ing nature as "other" has lost all meaning. With that notion defunct, the theoretic base hitherto used by much of landscape design is undermined.

Yet it can be argued that designed landscapes are still mimetic efforts. The path from the front door of a house to the front gate is simply an artificial version of a track through a woodland or a meadow. Even the woodland path was made by humans; therefore, it is an artifact and not nature. Once humans are seen as a part of nature, there is no way of separating their work (so-called artifice) from nature.

Are intentionally designed landscapes separate from incidental creations, such as the path in the woods? Is one art and the other not?

The utility of a design might not have anything to do with whether it falls short of being high art. The path to a Japanese tea house is both utilitarian and sculpted. Bridges can be considered as art and not art. Perhaps it is the artist's that intention distinguishes what is merely useful from what is both useful and aesthetic. Hence the path in the woods can be considered something useful while the path to the front door can be considered something useful that has undergone an aesthetic transformation.

The artist's intention is always related to conventions of perception. In the past, art was mimetic of a cultural convention that saw nature as untouched by human beings. Of what is it mimetic today?

"When I think of wanting to make a pathway, I bring it down to experience. Sometimes you will suddenly come upon a path in the woods; possibly an animal track or one made by people walking. The feeling you have there you keep in the back of your mind and when the opportunity comes to actually make a space, it's the kind of feeling that you want to have happen again. On a very practical level, you're reiterating experiences that you've had," says sculptor Elyn Zimmerman.

Mimesis continues as an important aesthetic tradition but with an important distinction. The motor and soul of the old mimesis was that by experiencing nature as "other," there was an "other" from which we learned. Nature was unveiler of the nature of the universe. There is nothing now that says that looking into ourselves and our works is not the real way to unveil the universe. The nature we observe now is more complex. Given this shift in the definition of nature, the question we must ask is whether mimesis is still a valid metaphor for the relation of our art to our nature.