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## Places

### Title

Radnor Gateways Enhancement Strategy submitted by The Townscape Institute, Cambridge, Mass. [EDRA / Places Awards - Design]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h1646dt>

### Journal

Places, 12(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

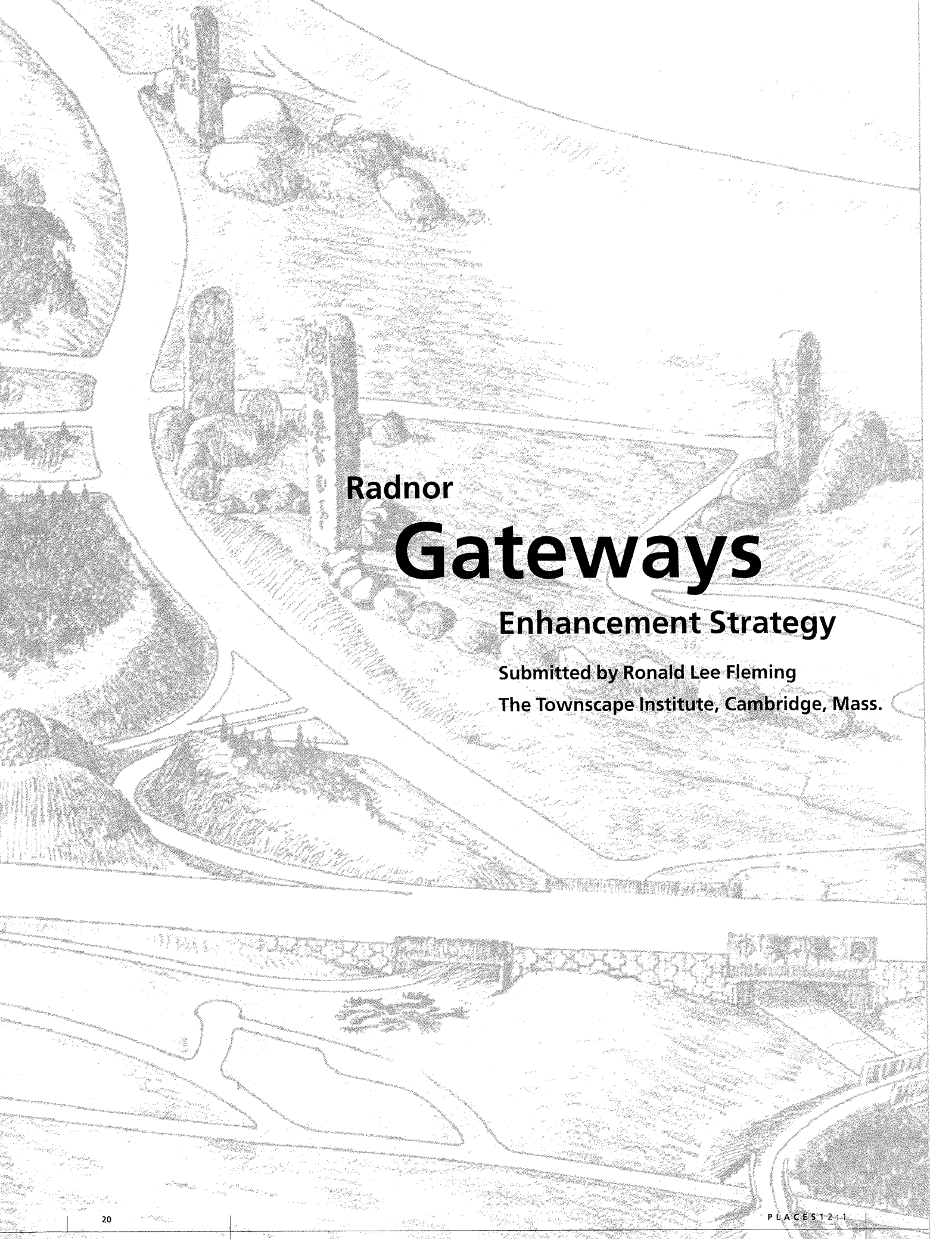
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### Publication Date

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed



**Radnor**

# **Gateways**

**Enhancement Strategy**

Submitted by Ronald Lee Fleming

The Townscape Institute, Cambridge, Mass.

The Radnor Gateways Enhancement Strategy was designed to redress the trauma created by the construction of an interstate highway through the township of Radnor, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia, and to enhance the strip commercial corridor that the new highway bisects. Radnor Gateways, which has been in the works since 1988 and is still being implemented, resulted from a collaboration between township officials and a design team led by Ronald Lee Fleming, AICP, who heads the non-profit organization, The Townscape Institute. The project involved a public-private partnership between the township and the Radnor Gateways Enhancement Strategy, a committee of property owners and business leaders along the corridor. The project has also succeeded in involving corporations, merchants, school children, highway construction crews employed by PENNDOT and the township public works department.

The project — which involves art, landscape and infrastructure projects as well as a new commercial design review program — is one of the few urban design projects that has effectively embraced a suburban highway corridor in order to render the image of the landscape, experienced fleetingly at the speed of automobile movement, more coherent in time and space. The project redefines a central place at the four corners of Wayne; it addresses Radnor's central business district; it establishes distinctive entry points at either end of the township; and it creates a rhythm of elements which provide design continuity at a highway scale. Moreover, the project not only redresses the fragmentation of the roadscape, it also unites a bland, self

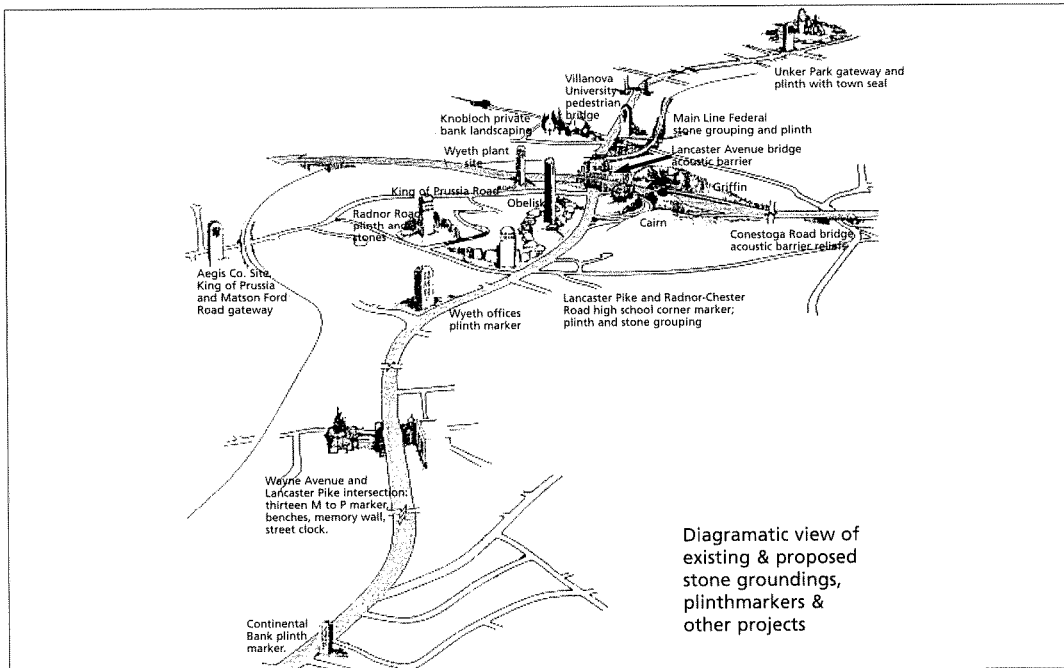
absorbed suburban community that once viewed township government as a strictly maintenance operation.

### The Story

The project's design was inspired by numerous major roadways and by the township's Welsh heritage. Originally triggered by the construction of the "Blue Route," a western bypass around Philadelphia, the enhancement strategy was originally meant to address the new freeway and the five-mile corridor of U.S. Route 30, which cuts east-west across Radnor and is also known as the old Lancaster Pike.

Perhaps it was a matter of reflecting upon the site's continuing transformation that the designer began to wonder about the city's evolution over a longer period of time. Radnor, originally settled by Welsh farmers, was once the estate country for wealthy Philadelphians and has since been emerging as a suburban residential and commercial center. But how could the site's heritage lead to a design scheme? The strategy proposed by Fleming and his team soon encompassed cairns, plinths and other symbolic stone groupings to mark important points along the current-day roads.

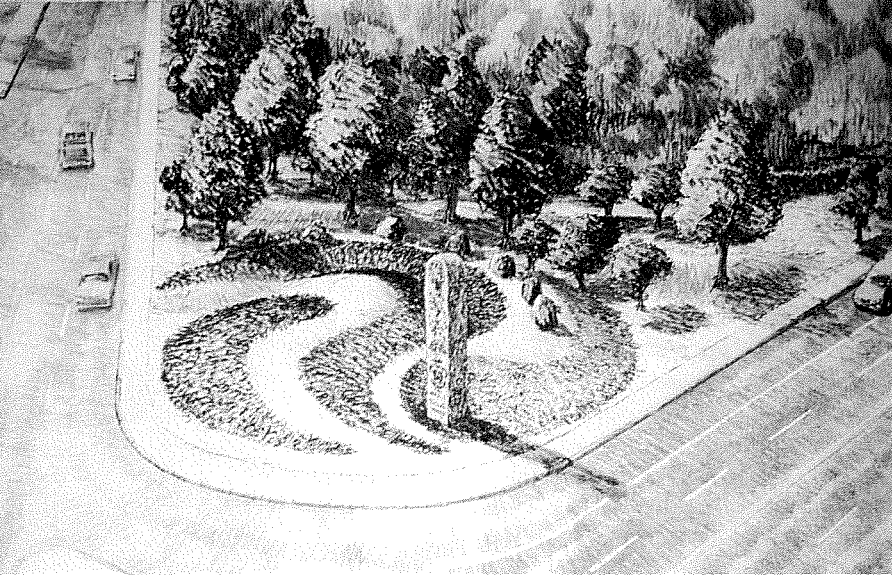
When Fleming was hired in 1988 to propose a way to enhance the site with landscape elements, the project was not clearly defined. The original plan was to simply enhance the site of the "Blue Route" with trees and flowers; however, the township also wanted to create a distinctive new entry from the new "Blue Route" and transform the perception of the Lancaster Pike, America's oldest toll road. The specific scope of



facing page: Close-up detail of stone groupings in the I-476 Interchange.

this page: Aerial diagrammatic view of existing and proposed stone groundings, plinth markers and other projects.

Drawings: William Reimann



## Research

Fleming had been researching the place-making qualities of public art and the regulation of commercial signage and architecture for many years, and that experience informed the strategy, which was to transcend the initial planning vision of the township. Working with the township's commissioners, its planning board and PENNDOT, the design team discovered existing place meanings and associations through community support. Research about the Welsh origins of the early settlers, the symbolic implications of the township seal, and the remaining eighteenth-century milestones, helped the planning team to construct a design vision that had some resonance with the community's history.

In retrospect, the design team has observed that there could have been a more public design forum to articulate the strategy, rather than the township commissioner meetings, which were open to the public. But that research model would have anticipated the kind of populist "environmental brief" that a more public process might require. Further research might still inform the design team as to whether a more public process would have modified the design considerably.

## Design and Implementation

The design work involved the collaborative skills of a sculptor, artisans, landscape designers and planners. The principal elements in the enhancement strategy included six design strategies.

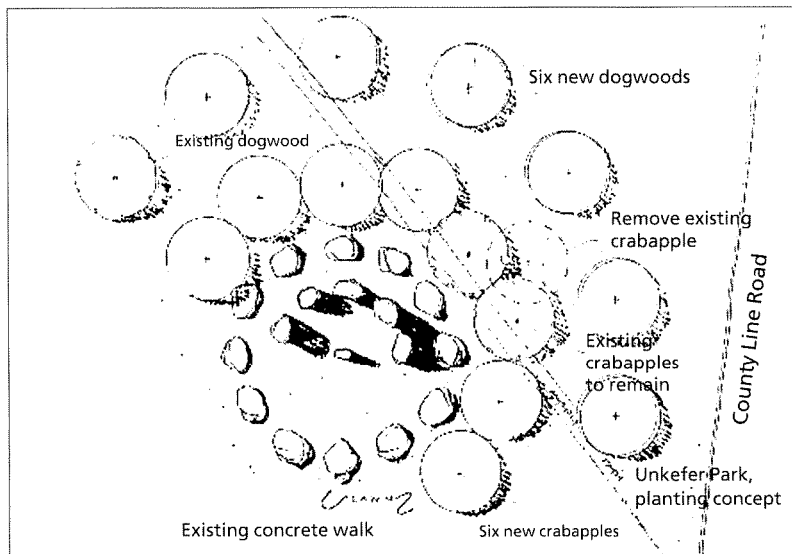
*Milestones.* A series of largely lost, but still memorable eighteenth-century mile markers were recreated. Originally designed to be eighteen inches tall, they were redeployed at an auto scale of 8 feet.

*Raised reliefs.* The sound barriers along the Blue Route incorporated elements of the township seal — the griffin, lion, sheaves of wheat and a tree.

*Groupings of stones.* Stone was excavated from the freeway corridor then arranged in the forms of cairns, plinths, stone circles and other Neolithic compositions that recall the heritage of the original settlers.

*Lighting.* The strategy included the illumination of the town's stone church towers.

*An animated clock.* The installment of a clock that utilizes the seal design elements. This was meant to encourage pedestrian activity and reinforce the thematic understanding at the point of greatest pedestrian traffic, the four corners of Wayne, where an obelisk will mark the Blue Route entrance.



work included a number of objectives. The design was to provide a sense of arrival and cultural orientation at key points along the way, physically link the corridor by establishing design relationships between discrete elements and encourage the animation of the principal community space — the intersection of the Lancaster Pike and Wayne Avenue.

*Plantings.* This included related flower plantings, a golden arc of daffodils around the high school and corporate perimeter plantings by citizens and high school students.

In addition to these design strategies, a new design review ordinance was introduced to upgrade commercial corridor development, including gasoline stations. The enhancement strategy has followed a dynamic planning process without the aid of a fixed master plan, although a rendered artistic vision has served a similar purpose. The strategy has also been incremental, and this presents opportunities for different public and private players to participate at different times. It is a dynamic process as well, because there are several possible sequences of actions that depend on the interplay between different parties. Finally, the plan has also evolved with specific opportunities, and the planning process seems to reach different levels of maturity at points along the strip, especially where there are scarcer resources and no comprehensive urban renewal powers.

### Significance to Users

In the contentious America of the 1990s, success might be defined as reaching a point when citizen protests do not lead to the dismantling of intelligibly researched and crafted “strategies.” With regards to this implementation strategy, it should be noted that in the five years the strategy has been in place, approximately twenty-five stone monuments have been sited along the five-mile corridor; about 130 trees have been planted; a number of new buildings along the corridor have passed through the design review process; and three existing service stations have substantially improved their landscaping. An early indicator of success, at least in terms of public use and site animation, was the assemblage of a group of self-styled druids who used the first ring of stones marking the Township’s entryway to the east with Lower Merion Township, for solstice ceremonies.

### Jury Comments

**Lawrence Halprin:** This is an incredibly creative way of dealing with high-speed automobiles running through towns or through areas; it depends on the idea of making the trip and the choreography of the trip, with movements through space, an enjoyable and designed activity. Not that it’s just a single movement right through, but there is a visual content — a stopping and starting — that is part of all art forms. In addition to that, the project involves research that helped the designers develop an iconography of the



past that relates it to this particular place. This basic idea could be transformed to any place, using the design of motion through space to develop an art form.

**Donlyn Lyndon:** To follow the same line of thought, there is so much discussion now about place and movement, with the implication that the only things that are places are specific rooms. In fact, we identify place at many scales and in many ways, and this is an example of actually staking out a larger territory through a repetitive element that you keep coming up against. And so they are actually helping to form another kind of allegiance to a territory, an allegiance to territory that equals place, as far as I’m concerned, that marks out a place through which you are mobile, rather than only a place in which you are static.

**Halprin:** That also implies that you are not rushing through, that the motion here is not to start somewhere and go to somewhere else past this place. This becomes, at another speed level, a place that you become part of.

**Clare Cooper Marcus:** This is a good example of resurrecting the history of a local area by going back to the cultural icons of its earliest inhabitants and placing them as markers in a major thoroughway.

**Gary Hack:** I like the fact that this project really does give structure to the corridor, that it allows people to structure it in their minds in important ways. My one reservation about it is that it really is an overlay of an idea which probably has rather little cultural relevance to most of the people who travel through this place. There are not many Welsh people living in suburban Philadelphia these days. In fact, most of the Welshness of suburban Philadelphia is encapsulated in names like Bryn Mar, and other place names along the way, so in a way, it’s a set of references that probably are culturally not too relevant. Nonetheless, it’s quite a terrific way of giving a psychological structure to the corridor.

*facing page top:* Obelisk proposed at Springmill Rd. and Lancaster Pike.

*middle:* A circle of buried stones at Unkefer Park entryway, the boundary that connects Radnor Township with Lower Merion Township. *Photo:* Ronald Lee Fleming

*bottom:* Plan of stone circle.

*this page:* Icons from the Radnor town seal are stenciled onto sound barrier walls on top of the new Blue Route bridges over Lancaster Pike (U.S. 30) and Conestoga Road. *Photo:* Ronald Lee Fleming