

Linda Covit Creates an Environmental Installation in Orange, Texas

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Orange, Texas, is an unlikely location for both a botanical garden and contemporary art, but the recently opened Shangri La Botanical Garden and Nature Center makes a trip there well worth making. Located 120 miles east of Houston, Orange was home to naturalist and businessman Luther Stark, who began developing a garden on his 252 acres on Adams Bayou in 1937. Opened to the public in 1946, it became a popular tourist attraction with azaleas, wildlife, natural water features and stands of native trees, but without comprehensive design or specific educational mission. Following a harsh freeze in the late 1950s, the garden closed, visited only occasionally thereafter by local Boy Scouts for camping and canoeing.

Stark established a foundation in 1961 to manage his considerable assets of land, timber, and art, and for many years, it supported local community projects through its mission "to improve the quality of life in Southeast Texas by encouraging,

promoting and assisting education, the arts, and health and human services." In 2002 the Foundation's Board envisioned development possibilities for the property and engaged Louisiana landscape architect Jeffrey Carbo FASLA, and two Texas design firms, MESA and Lake Flato Architects. Together, they began an ambitious process to develop a botanical garden and environmental education center that would benefit the local community as well as become an attraction for regional visitors.

In addition to the site's obvious environmental considerations, there were equally important issues to address related to mission, facility programming, design, and management, all of which were relatively new at this scale for the Board. There were sensitivities too regarding the Foundation's purpose, the Board's stewardship its property, and how its resources, by now substantial, should be spent. Guiding everything was the Board's sense of environmental responsibility and its desire to create something unique. Quickly, however, the Board became fully engaged in discussions with the design team about contemporary design ideas and development concepts.

One such idea involved including artwork in the project. Conversations started in fall 2004 when Carbo's office asked for my suggestions for artists who could create artworks representing botanical forms for four "garden rooms" of a botanical garden project. At the time, I was a public art consultant, having been the director of the Percent For Art Program in New Orleans since the program's inception in 1987. Two of this program's tenants were that public artists are problem solvers, and that remarkable results can happen when site characteristics and program requirements guide resolutions. Recommending a competition, I described a basic process: articulate project characteristics; secure a reasonable budget; write a project announcement; and cast a wide net through available public art resources. Carbo convinced the Board; they committed resources, and in early 2005 I was engaged to conduct a competition to select an artist.

An initial e-mail about the project was distributed to hundreds of public artists; 80 requested project information, and 37 submitted materials responding to the five stated

evaluation considerations: artistic vocabulary; evidence of completed work of a similar scale/project-budget; facility with a diversity of media; public art experience; collaborative design team experience. Carbo reviewed a shortlist of seven in April, 2005, and together, we narrowed the list to three. Their materials were presented to the Board and design team, and two were invited to Orange for interviews. Ultimately each was given a stipend to develop proposals (models, drawings, budgets, and timetables for completion) for presentation in September, 2005.

The month before, however, hurricane Katrina roared through the Gulf South, followed closely by Rita. Orange bore the brunt of Rita's destructive 160+ miles/hour wind, and Shangri La was devastated, losing more than 75% of its trees (over 30,000). The Board, however, remained fully committed to moving forward with construction of Carbo's master plan (including the art project), and the proposal by artist Linda Covit of Montreal was selected. After months of general site cleanup, site work resumed and Covit began fabrication in her

Linda COVIT, *Circle Garden*, 2008. Stainless steel, Texas Leuters stone. 305 x 549 x 549 cm / 10' x 18' x 18'. Photo: Marc Cramer.



Linda COVIT, *Branching Garden*, 2008. Stainless steel, Texas Leuters stone. 305 x 793 x 793 cm. Photo: Marc Cramer.

→ Linda COVIT, *Stripe Garden*, 2008. Stainless steel, Texas Leuters stone. 305 x 701 x 701 cm. The Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center, Orange, Texas. Commissioned by the Nelda C. and H. J. Lutzer Stark Foundation. Working in close collaboration with the landscape architect, Linda Covit integrated four sculptural installations into garden rooms designed by Jeffrey Carbo, FASLA Landscape Architects. Photo: Marc Cramer.



← Linda COVIT, *Spiral Garden*, 2008. Stainless steel, Texas Leuters stone. Photo: Marc Cramer.

Montreal studio. The garden opened in March, 2008.

Shangri La is certified LEED Platinum, the highest level of green building and performance measures. Its current mission—"to mentor children of all ages to be kind to their world"—is focused on recycling and environmental education and facilitated through the exhibits, programs, site design, facility administration, and sustainable environmental management strategies including water retention for irrigation, elimination of invasive plants, and using re-cycled construction materials.

Covit's art works extremely well in this didactic situation. Upon first seeing her material I was struck by the subtlety and elegance with which her work explored environmental themes through an artistic vocabulary that is at once sophisticated yet approachable, simple but engaging and provocative. Her work here involves four installations, each of which is a visual riff on the designated botanical phenomenon: stripe, spiral, branching, and circle. Pierced stainless steel panels and screens with horizontal elements are installed on terraces of grey and white aggregate, creating themed "rooms" off the garden's main path. Seating is included, and adjacent planting reflects each room's theme. Cut-out images, while stylized, are realistic enough to engage most observers, and negative spaces in both screens and panels frame adjacent plantings in interesting and unexpected ways. These spaces work effectively for solitary, contemplative reflection as well as for outdoor classrooms to introduce basic patterns in nature. Covit's work effectively satisfies the landscape architect's vision and addresses the client's mission of environmental education. At once commanding yet environmentally unobtrusive, her installations articulate places, celebrate natural forms, and address program requirements in creative ways. They are equally effective as individual units and successful as a grouping of four. In addition, Covit's works mesh seamlessly with the architecture of Lake Flato elsewhere in the garden through their shared vocabulary of design and materials. When viewed within the context of Covit's earlier work, this recent installation advances her range while it remains true to her artistic vision.

Covit's art works extremely well in this didactic situation and fits comfortably in the local environment, now somewhat bruised and

tattered from recent hurricanes.

Upon first seeing her material I was struck by the subtlety and elegance with which her work explored environmental themes with an artistic vocabulary that is at once sophisticated yet approachable, simple but engaging and provocative. Her work here involves four installations, each of which is a visual riff on the designated botanical phenomenon—stripe, spiral, branching, and circle—identified by the landscape architects as themes for "garden rooms." Lattice screens with horizontal elements and thin, stainless steel boxes with identical pierced panels are installed on terraces of grey and white aggregate, creating these rooms off the garden's main path. Seating is included, and adjacent plantings reflect each room's theme. Cut-out images on the front and rear of the structures, while stylized, are realistic enough to engage observers, and the interplay of identical images, separated by perhaps two inches between the front and rear panels, creates interesting shadow patterns of positive and negative spaces. In addition, negative spaces in both screens and panels frame adjacent plantings in unexpected ways and provide changing views, as one enters and exits the rooms, of the adjacent landscape. These spaces work effectively for solitary, contemplative reflection as well as for outdoor classroom use to introduce small groups to basic patterns in nature. Covit's work effectively satisfies the landscape architect's vision of incorporating themes from nature into site-specific artwork, addresses the client's mission of environmental education, and creates an effective multi-part installation sensitive to its setting. At once commanding yet environmentally unobtrusive, her installations articulate places, celebrate natural forms, and address program requirements in creative ways. They are equally effective as individual units and successful as a grouping of four. In addition, Covit's works mesh seamlessly with the architecture of Lake Flato elsewhere in the garden through their shared vocabulary of design and materials. When viewed within the context of Covit's earlier work, this recent installation advances her range while it remains true to her artistic vision. ←

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