



Q&A with Walter Hood

Creating exhibitions beyond our walls with intention, commitment, openness, and creativity can help us forge relationships that are meaningful for all involved. In this issue, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier interviews Walter Hood, Creative Director and Founder of Hood Design Studio, to learn how his community-centered design work in urban spaces might inspire and inform our own practices.

Q Ellen In a 2010 interview about Splash Pad Park in Oakland, California, you talked about how you transformed a deserted traffic island under the city’s I-580 freeway into a multi-use, flexible park serving a diverse, vibrant, urban neighborhood. “It’s a hybrid space,” you said; “Everyone can find a way in.” This seems to be a theme in your work. How do you go about determining what the entry points for inclusion will be in your projects?

A Walter My definition of hybrid comes from my interest in linguistics which suggests that there can be “formal” and “informal” hybrids. It took me a while to begin to understand how public space in America (where typologies are colonial) works. The East Coast has the square; the West Coast and the Southwest have the plaza because of English and Spanish colonization.

Over time, these typologies became familiar and defined how you actually act out in a space. If you think of the public square on the East Coast, there was always a monument in the middle, so you moved around it in a certain way, whereas the West Coast had the plaza, which initially was an undifferentiated space because it was just an idea. Over time, culture layers meaning in the landscape through its social use. Looking closer at history, you can see these formal and spatial ideas emerge. At Splash Pad Park, people wanted it to be a park but it wasn’t big enough. So what are the ingredients people were expecting to see? In America, a park has to have grass. So it is those simple elements and things. We removed a street but left the old curbs; we took the formal idea of the

garden; the formal idea of the plaza; and the formal idea of the park and merged them all together, accentuating the familiar aspects in each so that people would feel welcome and know how to utilize the space.

Informal hybrids are a little different. The informal is when typologies are not present. We can define new space through linguistics – creating a new language for landscapes. So for example, we have projects like *Saint Monica’s Tears* [a stone formation at a California light-rail station] and the Solar Strand [a linear landscape formation using photovoltaics and recycled materials for the University of Buffalo]. They are not typologies. They’re created through a linguistic framework, which gives us freedom to operate in different ways.

Q Your work seamlessly blends urban design, public art, and landscape architecture. How has this approach best served you?

A I think it was clear to me that I couldn’t solve or even approach certain projects through strict disciplinary boundaries. In architecture, landscape architecture, and urbanism, there’s only so much you can do independently; the professions are so siloed. You’ll find landscape architects talking about hunger and poverty where they don’t necessarily have the tools to actually help with these issues.

I like not having disciplinary boundaries. I refer to myself as an artist – a landscape and public artist. I’m not an architect, urban designer, or landscape architect. When a

Walter Hood is the Creative Director and Founder of Hood Design Studio in Oakland, California. Hood Design Studio is a cultural practice, working across art, fabrication, design, landscape, research, and urbanism. He is also the David K. Woo Chair and the Professor of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning at the University of California, Berkeley. He lectures on and exhibits professional and theoretical projects nationally and internationally. He was the spring 2020 Diana Balmori Visiting Professor at the Yale School of Architecture and the spring 2021 Senior Loeb Scholar for the Harvard GSD Loeb Fellowship.

Walter creates urban spaces that resonate with and enrich the lives of current residents while also honoring communal histories. Hood melds architectural and fine-arts expertise with a commitment to designing ecologically sustainable public spaces that empower marginalized communities. Over his career, he has transformed traffic islands, vacant lots, and freeway underpasses into spaces that challenge the legacy of neglect of urban neighborhoods. Through engagement with community members, he teases out the natural and social histories as well as current residents' shared patterns and practices of use and aspirations for a place.





project comes our way, we want to be free in our approach. Art is a way of working with freedom. Some projects emerge through the medium of landscape. Sometimes it's many things together. That's been the revelation for me over the last couple years; to free myself from disciplinary boundaries. This way, every project is unique. Every project is different. There is no sameness.

Q You've written about bringing the humanity and deeply embedded stories in Black landscapes to life. How can we do this?

A In the 1990s, when I was doing community work, I'd go to meetings and there would be people missing, particularly those people who look like me. I found that very early on I had to be a surrogate advocate. I knew what the issues were. Even today, we know what the issues are; I don't need to do mapping or extensive analysis. There was a recent article in the *New York Times* about why there are no trees in Black neighborhoods. We know why; we know redlining history; these are things we should be talking about because they are visible – for example, that we've devalued landscapes for the last 100 years in places like Boston, Detroit, Chicago Southside, West Oakland, New York, and Philadelphia, to name a few. If people are really interested in having that conversation, this is the place to start. You don't need to set up a participatory process. You just say, "I'm going to plant a million trees. I'm going to provide access to education." How do we begin to be prophetic about the things we do? I do think when we look at the truth, it might lead us to tackling and approaching these urban environments in a different way.

Q You talk about liking public spaces to be messy – not in the sense of being

garbage-strewn, but in the sense of spirit – and about not trying to control everything, about the value of improvising. Could you talk a little bit about what it means to be "messy" and why it's useful?

A Messy emerges from the idea of improvisation. John Michal Vlach [a folklorist who has focused his research on the African diaspora] writes about taking something old and familiar and remaking it into something new, unique, and modern. It's this notion of taking something that preexists and you do something to it to make it new. The other aspect is understanding that colonialism is about sameness. For years I was talking about homogeneity and standardization but I came to realize I was talking about sameness. Like the acorn historic light on street lamps, every city covets these things, why? Because they're the same. *Messiness is difference*. Give me 10 different lights versus 10 that are the same. Our environments are like ecologies: they're messy, entropic, constantly moving; culture is also entropic, we're constantly evolving; there needs to be enough difference out there to allow for us to see how we can become. Right now, it's cloaked through sameness.

Q So it sounds as if you are deciphering embedded meanings and symbols in the built landscape, interrogating them, and then creating something new out of them that's messier, different, more relevant, more attuned to a community's particular narrative, practices and patterns – could you talk about that?

A Currently in Virginia I'm doing a piece inspired by bottle trees. The mythology of putting light (reflection) in trees to keep away the spirits. These mythical musings

provide a more culturally relevant way of seeing the world. It can throw everything on its head. We need to be evocative in how we make the old new. In Santa Monica, we just finished *Saint Monica's Tears*. It's a massive sandstone installation; sandstone, shaped by water, evokes the site's geological history. Through research, I learned that the city was named for Saint Monica [who is said to have wept nightly for her son Augustine's debauched lifestyle; a Spanish missionary likened a pair of springs to her crying eyes]. This history became an entry point for the piece. Later I met a Native Tongva elder, who wanted to bless the sculpture. She told me her people call Santa Monica the "crying rock" to evoke grief over the Indigenous lives lost during Spanish colonization. So I [originally] called the piece *The Crying Rock and Santa Monica*. That is a way of how we connect people through projects: through stories, through evocation.

The stories, though, are not always the truth, and this is where art comes in. In landscape and architecture, people look at history as something that is definite and refined, whereas the artist is able to take history and weave it into a different story through their particular lens.

Q What advice do you have for a museum thinking about ways to engage with its communities through outdoor exhibitions? Are there certain essentials – either ways of thinking or specific physical elements – that you find yourself turning to as you consider ways to build community?

A It's about the recognition of place. A lot of times we don't recognize that there's something there. No matter how contested it might be, that's the place where you begin. I'll take our Pearl Street project in

Philadelphia. We were hired along with others in a social practice format to think about ways to revitalize this rundown alley. Artist Rick Lowe [founder of Houston, Texas's Project Rowhouses] and I spent a week there and interviewed people who shared space along this alley. There's a high school, so we did interviews there; there's a 300-bed mission, so we interviewed the mission pastor; there's an arts community and condos and the Chinatown neighborhood; we interviewed people from these.

The alley was a bad place, and everyone was blaming the homeless people in the mission for it. People wanted to turn it into a park to get rid of these brown people. I said no, I can't turn it into a park; Philly is a city of alleys, and it's an alley, a connector. We started looking at the place more closely, and it turns out it was on the edge of the furniture district in Philly. So we looked up the kinds of furniture made there – Queen Anne chairs, etc. – and we made furniture. In the alley we put the tables and chairs in a long line. At that point it wasn't about designing. It was about getting people in the space. We did that for two consecutive years to bring people together and help people see the alley as an alley.

This becomes a way of interrogating space. It's more speculative, but I think when you are prophetic, meaning you tell the truth, it sets you off on a different course. You can't just bring something in; you need to be part of something larger. Building community is not a temporary thing. If you are really interested in cultivating a place, it's not something you can do in a weekend. ■