

The Pittsburgh weddings

In the first of two articles, Ian Thompson, describes two artist-landscape architect collaborations in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States of America, which are contributing to the city's cultural rebirth

↑ Agnes R Katz Plaza: The square is pure Kiley, a very simple restrained modernism, while the wobbly ziggurat placed in the middle is an outrageous and weirdly organic pile of bronze which somehow functions as a fountain. The baffling sculptural eyeballs, carved from black granite, can be used as seats.

[All photographs: Ian Thompson]

If you have any image of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it is probably of a smoke-blanketed city, ringed by steel mills and belching furnaces. That picture is about 20 years out of date. Like so many northern British cities, Pittsburgh has lost the heavy industry upon which its prosperity was based, but is energetically striving to reinvent itself as a place worth living in, a process which is being led, to a great extent, by artists and landscape architects. This article will describe two artist-landscape architect collaborations, the first between Dan Kiley and Louise Bourgeois, and the second between Michael Van Valkenburg and Ann Hamilton.

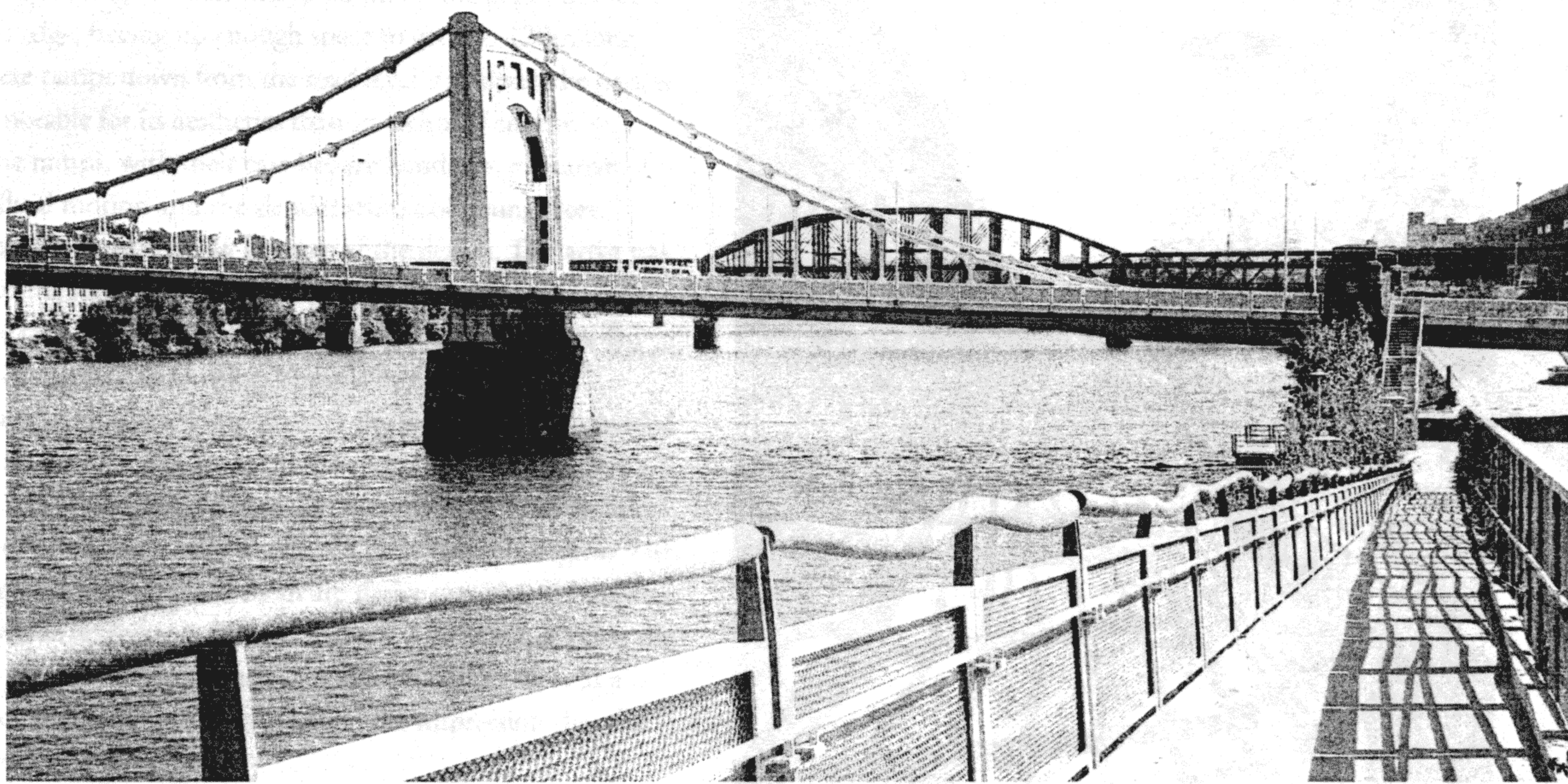
Perhaps Pittsburgh's natural British twin ought to be Sheffield, another steel town that has shed its mills, but at the same time I could not help noticing strong parallels with my home conurbation of Newcastle-Gateshead, a place which has flown onto the international art map by the 'Angel of the North' sculpture and which may become the European City of Culture in 2008. Both Newcastle and Pittsburgh are cities which are strongly associated with their rivers. Pittsburgh, (sited where two great rivers, the Allegheny and the Monongahela, flow together to form the Ohio River) was the USA's largest inland port.

Newcastle's Tyneside may be proud of its suite of bridges, but the River Tyne can hardly match Pittsburgh's 64km of riverfront. Some estimates of the number of bridges in Pittsburgh top 2,000.

Just as the River Tyne became Newcastle's dirty back alley, so did Pittsburgh consign its riverfronts to industry and commerce. There was little provision for public access. In particular, a plan produced in 1910 by Frederick Law Olmsted Junior to create a chain of riverside parks at the confluence of the three rivers was not implemented. The Van Valkenburg-Hamilton collaboration is one step towards the eventual realisation of this vision.

Tomato ketchup regeneration

The unlikely fuel which is powering Pittsburgh's downtown regeneration is tomato ketchup. Pittsburgh is the home city of the Heinz company, and the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, the non-profit organisation formed in 1984 which is behind Pittsburgh's cultural renaissance, is supported by the Heinz endowments. The Heinz dynasty seems to be behind every progressive venture in Pittsburgh, and it has been this way throughout the city's history. It was H J Heinz and his associates who were originally



→ Allegheny Riverside Park: the engineering solution was to cantilever the park 5km over the water's edge

responsible for the engagement of Frederick Law Olmsted Junior to prepare his openspace masterplan. The latter had already been commissioned to improve the grounds of the Heinz home in Pittsburgh. Later, when the Heinz family offered to donate their east end home and landscape designed grounds to the city for a park, the gift was refused. The authorities said that they could not afford the maintenance costs, such was the priority given to open space and amenity in Pittsburgh's industrial heyday.

Waterfront reclamation

The key to the transformation of post-industrial cities is often waterfront reclamation. As I write this, the handrails are being fixed like lashes to the blinking eye of Tyneside's stunning new Millennium bridge which will soon link the Newcastle quayside to Gateshead's Baltic Art Gallery, created in a riverside flour mill. Similarly, the new cultural heart of Pittsburgh beats in the downtown area known as the 'Triangle', where the Monongahela and the Allegheny rivers converge. It was a decaying red-light district, where the Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, home of the Pittsburgh Symphony and a harbinger of the cultural revival to come, stood in splendid isolation. Here, in a district which once boasted eight movie palaces, you will now find the O'Reilly Theater, designed by Michael Graves, and the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts, a renovated cinema from 1928 that now hosts theatre, dance and touring Broadway shows.

The executive of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, Carol Brown, a former English professor, explained that when the organisation began to consider new design projects and the streetscape, its goal was to bring artists and architects together. In overseeing this initiative, she was assisted by a volunteer committee of citizens who worked in the area of art and design. Artists and architects were invited to team up to make proposals. When the Allegheny riverside project, eventually awarded to Van Valkenburg and Hamilton, was advertised, Brown was amazed by the response: "The day that the qualifications were due, you couldn't get off the elevator. There were boxes and boxes and boxes of proposals."

Dynamic diversity

The Agnes R Katz Plaza lies in the midst of this regenerating quarter. It is a collaboration between two octogenarians, the sculptor Louise Bourgeois and the landscape architect Dan Kiley. It is tempting to write 'two stubborn octogenarians' because both parties seem to have willfully done their own thing. It reminded me of a student project which we tried to run with sculpture students at the university of Newcastle a few years ago. The idea was that a sculptor and a landscape architect would get together and produce a proposal for a courtyard in the university's Medical School. Almost without exception, the landscape students designed a square and the art students put something in the middle. That is more or less what has happened in the Katz Plaza. The square is pure Kiley, a very simple, restrained modernism, while the wobbly ziggurat placed in the middle is an outrageous and weirdly organic pile of bronze which somehow functions as a fountain. It looks rather as if some mythical and metallic beast has flown over and dropped a tower of its dung. Lighting tubes linked to a colour wheel projection unit are concealed within the water troughs. At night the fountain glows eerily in many hues. Bourgeois has also contributed some baffling sculptural eyeballs, carved from black granite, which can be used as seats. The stylistic contrast is bracing, but it hardly qualifies as a collaboration. Even Carol Brown, who brought the artist and the designer together, admits that "what's Dan's and what's Louise's just screams out at you."

Working in harmony

The collaboration between Michael van Valkenburg and Ann Hamilton, on the other hand, is so seamless that one cannot tell where the work of the landscape designer ends or that of the artist begins. This is all the more impressive when one learns that before they submitted their joint proposal they had not met.

Their site was a tough one, more than a kilometre long, but only 12.5m wide. Squeezed between the river's edge and the Tenth Street Bypass and some 8m below the level of the city streets, the site is frequently inundated during the winter months when ice floes on the Allegheny are not uncommon.

The engineering solution was to cantilever the park 5m over the water's edge, freeing up enough space to get two 120m long concrete ramps down from the road level. However, the park is more notable for its aesthetics than its technical ingenuity.

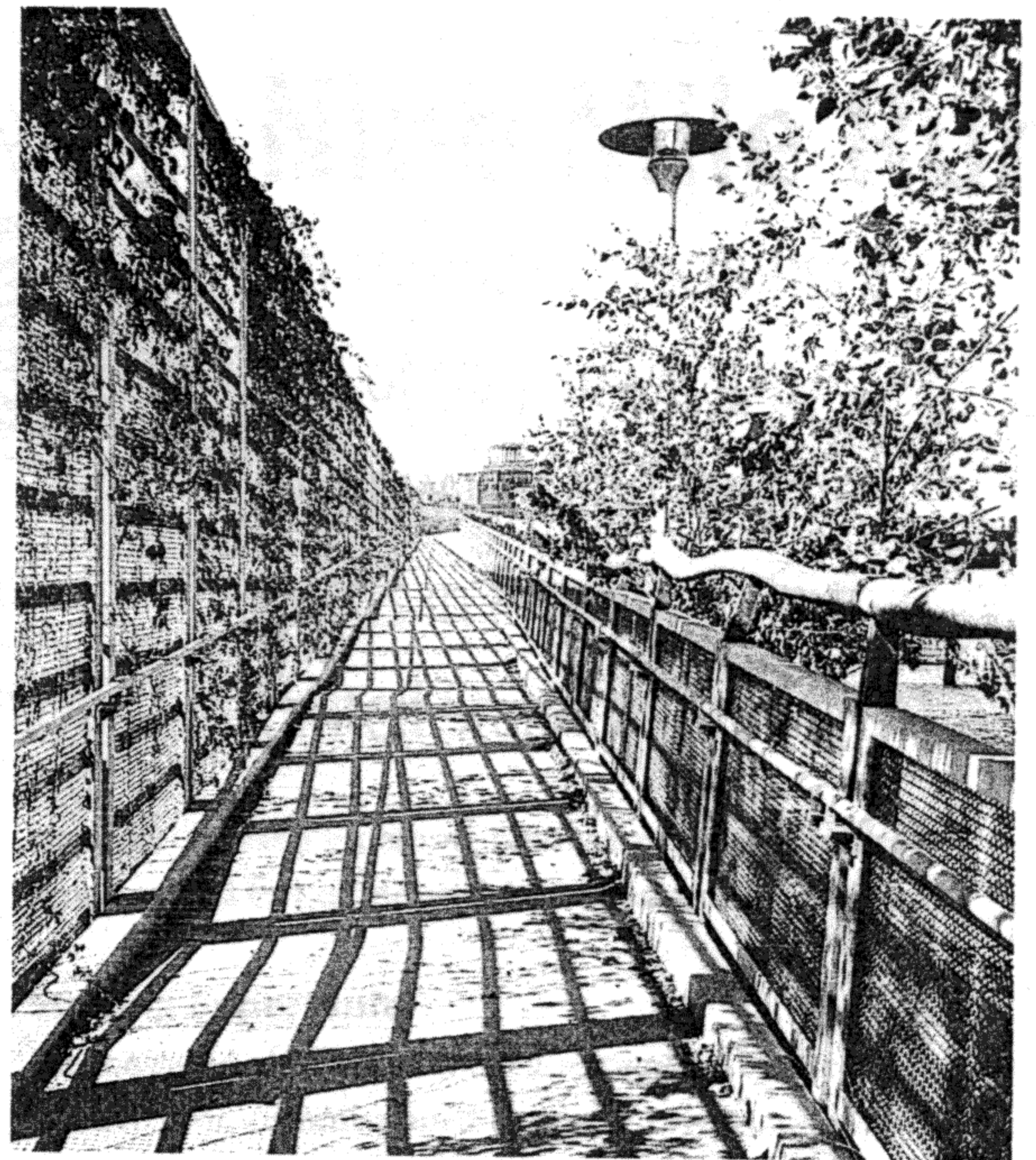
The ramps, with their cast-bronze handrails, evocative of both fluid motion and the slender trunks of young trees, become the most striking features of the design. The artist has pressed the foliage of rushes into the setting concrete to leave a filigree texture, while at the back of each ramp there is a 4m high 'vinescreen' supporting Virginia creeper.

Cantilevering the footpath over the water has also provided space on land for planting native flood plain trees like river birch, red maple, silver maple and cottonwood. They should endure the flooding and, if snapped by ice, should regrow with multiple trunks. Between them are native grasses and boulders. The overall aesthetic is faintly Japanese. The benches along the river's edge are a clever touch — close enough to serve as a psychological barrier, without giving the impression that the river has been fenced off.

A second phase of the park, at a higher level, is currently under construction. The medial strip is being removed from a six-lane highway, freeing a 15m wide corridor for the creation of a park which overlooks the river. Planted with London planes, this park will be more urban in character than the riverside strip below.

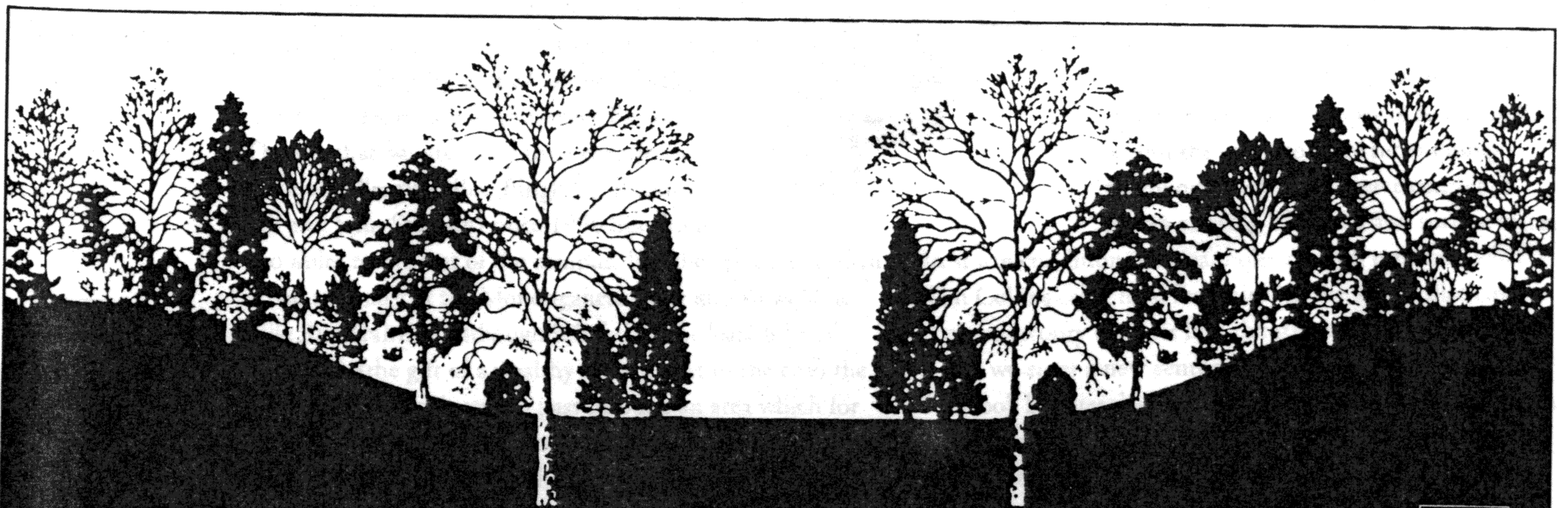
In their very different ways the contributions made by Bourgeois and Hamilton have enriched the designs of eminent landscape architects. While Bourgeois' intention is difficult to read, her arresting fountain succeeds through a strategy of contrast. Hamilton, on the other hand has blended her contribution with Van Valkenburg's in a subtle and harmonious manner.

Divergent though they are, in both the Hamilton-Van Valkenburg and the Bourgeois-Kiley collaborations, the artists and the landscape architects stay well inside conventional



notions of their professional roles. This, as we shall see in the next article, cannot be said of the upstream involvement of Goto and Collins. Not only did these two not wait for an invitation to collaborate, as environmentally committed artists they inserted themselves into a process that was already comfortably underway... and with far-reaching results. □
Ian Thompson is a lecturer in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This article was made possible by a grant from the small grants panel of the research committee, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A further article will appear in May Landscape Design describing the work of Tim Collins and Reiko Goto, two artists whose work has turned them into champions of the polluted Nine Mile Run watercourse in Pittsburgh.

➤ The vinescreen costs complex shadow patterns one of the access ramps to the Alleghany Riverside Park. At the back of each ramp there is a 4km high 'vinescreen' supporting Virginia creeper



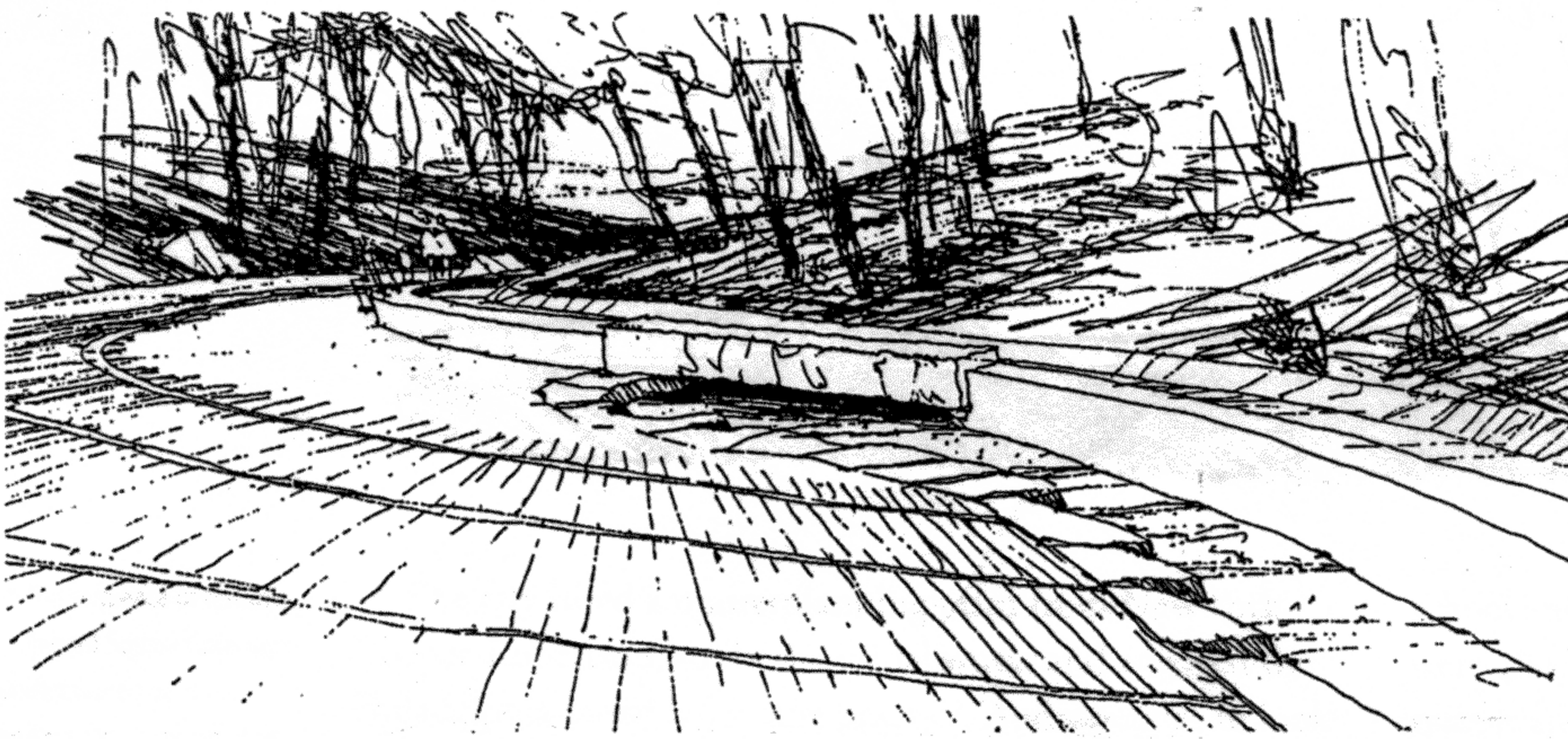
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Nine Mile Run

Ian Thompson recounts a tale of slag, sewers, stormwater and insurgent artists in Pittsburgh in the United States of America

↑ At Regent Square Gateway, Pittsburgh, urban runoff filtered through an embankment of recycled industrial slag emerges as 'spring' flow to enter Nine Mile Run

➤ Cisterns for collecting roof waters in the form of a transparent 'water wall' alongside the buildings at Sterrett School

[All illustrations: charette team (Bruce Ferguson, Richard Pinkham, Timothy Collins). From *Re-evaluating stormwater: the Nine Mile Run model for restorative redevelopment*, Rocky Mountain Institute, 1999.]

Landscape designers often envy artists. Less trammelled by clients, briefs and budgets, artists have the freedom to pursue their own agendas. However, artists may envy landscape designers, who often seem to have the authority and the budgets to suggest far-reaching changes which exceed an artist's usual grasp. The artist who works in public spaces usually has to wait for an invitation to collaborate. Of the two regeneration projects in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania described in a previous article (*LD 298*), one, the Kiley-Bourgeois scheme for the Katz Plaza, conformed to the usual model, with the designer framing a place and the artist putting something into the middle. The other, the Van Valkenburg-Hamilton scheme for the Allegheny Riverside, demonstrated a blurring of the two roles, yet within the usual constraints of commission and brief. A few miles upstream, however, two ecologically-motivated artists, Reiko Goto and Tim Collins, have demonstrated that artists do not always have to wait to be asked, and that they can become involved in the process of redevelopment in a way which goes far beyond the role conventionally granted to the public artist.

Goto and Collins are based in the Studio for Creative Inquiry in the College of Fine Arts at Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh. The site that has absorbed their energies (and those of colleagues, Bob Bingham, Richard Pell and John Stephen) since 1996 lies about two miles to the east of the campus. It is the catchment of an urban tributary of the Monongahela River known as Nine Mile Run (NMR). Although it is fed by the leafy hills of Frick Park (the gift of a wealthy industrialist to the city) the lower reaches of this stream pass through an area which for 70 years was the principal disposal site for a company called Duquesne Slag. Located within a few miles of the nation's largest steel mills, the NMR site offered the steel companies the cheapest way of getting rid of their unwanted by-products. An article by historian Andrew McElwaine on the studio's multimedia CD-ROM, 'Transforming Nine Mile Run', charts the failure of attempts by progressive elites in Pittsburgh during the first three decades of the 20th century to persuade the city authorities to purchase and conserve the valley for public use. "For the next seven decades," he

laments, "it was a gruesome moonscape, buried under as much as 120 feet of industrial by-products and wastes."

Striking opportunity

Yet the value of NMR had been recognised by Frederick Law Olmsted Jnr, commissioned to advise a civic commission set up by a reforming Democratic mayor, George Guthrie, in 1910. Olmsted's report suggested that: "Perhaps the most striking opportunity noted for a large park is the valley of Nine Mile Run. Its long meadows of varying width would make ideal playfields; the stream, when it is freed from sewage, will be an attractive and interesting element in the

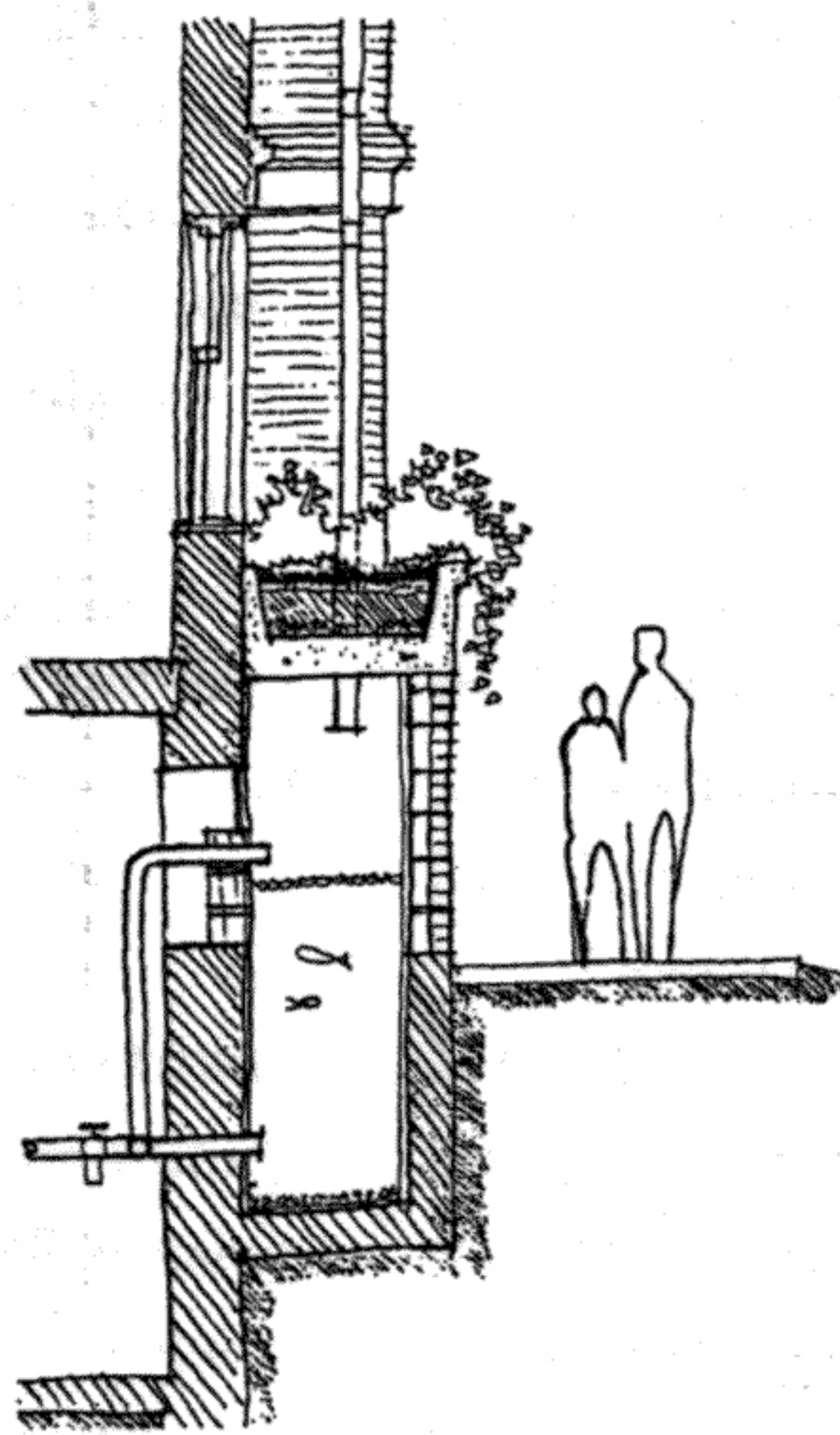
landscape; the wooded slopes on either side give ample opportunity for enjoyment of the forest, for shaded walks and cool resting places."

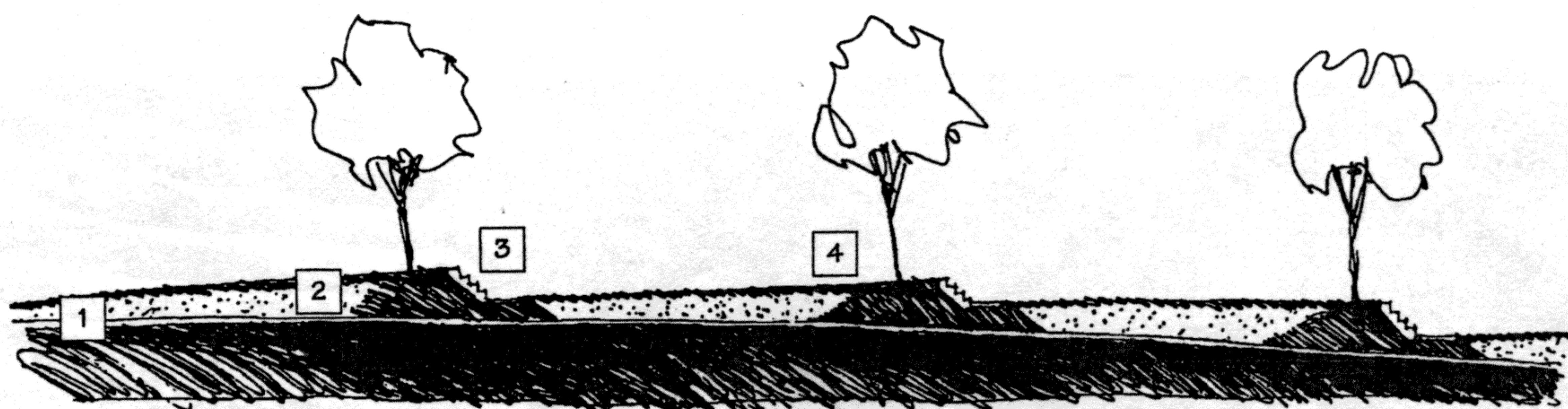
Unfortunately Olmsted's report was shelved when a Republican administration took over. The new mayor was willing to support improvements in transport infrastructure, but had little interest in environmental regulations or open spaces. The city authorities were blind to the gradual encroachments of Duquesne Slag's activities.

Nine Mile Run's problems were compounded by a number of sewers built within the valley to serve surrounding neighbourhoods. These were combined sewers carrying both foul and surface water.

In storm conditions the manholes can still turn into what Tim Collins calls "fecal fountains" as the sewers discharge their unsavoury burdens into the stream.

As we enter a new century, the prospects for Nine Mile Run look brighter than they have done for 90 years. Pittsburgh has lost most of its steel industry and the city is looking for ways to stem the loss of population. The city must sell itself as an attractive place to live and work. In 1994 it bought large areas of slag-covered land in Nine Mile Run with the intention of promoting the development of middle-class housing. As Joan Blaustein, a planner for the city government, explained: "We knew it was a challenging site, but we decided to take it on. We could deal with the environmental problems. It was too great a resource to let go. Situated on the rivers, so beautiful, great access, all those things." ●





➤ The sequence of terraces in Regent Square Gateway's underdrained basins: 1, underdrain; 2, constructed permeable soil; 3, check dam; 4, turf/planted cover

The city hired a masterplanning team from New York, Cooper-Robertson, to do the initial work, and engaged the Philadelphia-based landscape practice, Andropogon, to look at environmental issues. It was a condition of the brief that no material was to be taken off site.

When the consultants reported, their preferred concept involved culverting the stream. As Blaustein explained "pushing the slag right over into the valley gives you maximum developable land. They looked at the stream, they looked at the history of the pollution problem. The agencies had been trying to solve this for 25 years. They said, 'It can't be solved'. The best solution was 'cover it over'."

Artistic involvement

This was the point where, Blaustein says, the artists 'inserted themselves' into the planning process. They had been discussing the possibility of some kind of public art project to run in conjunction with the redevelopment. When they heard about the likely form of the development they were outraged. They galvanised local opposition to the extent that Cooper-Robertson had to revise its plans in order to retain the stream.

"I believed that it was the right solution," says Blaustein, "that it shouldn't have been culverted, but of course you have the development mentality which is 'if we're going to make this work financially we have to maximise the land and get the highest number of units per hectare', but I was always of the mind that we could tackle this. So we came to an agreement: we found a good masterplan."

Goto, Collins and their associates secured funding from the Heinz Endowments to facilitate a process of community dialogue concerning the future of the valley. As well as using the techniques of community participation and running an education programme in local schools, the artists based themselves in a caravan on the site, where they made experiments and practical demonstrations of remediation techniques.

Blaustein explained that the Studio's academic background gave them a level of credibility and trust with local constituencies that the city planners could never enjoy. The artists were monitoring everything that happened. "There was no getting them out. They were dug into this process, so that raised the city's credibility."

In October 1998, the artists, with the collaboration of the Rocky Mountain Institute, Snowmass, Colorado, organised a three-day design charrette, inviting 60 local and national landscape designers, artists, planners, and policy analysts, working alongside local citizens, to propose options for the 'restorative redevelopment' of four sites within the NMR valley, a neglected local park, a busy transport node, the grounds of a

school and a 'gateway' site at the outfall of a culvert. They were asked to find ways to remove stormwater from the sewer system and reintroduce it to the soil and vegetation.

The charrette's recommendations include many suggestions which should be familiar to British landscape architects – porous pavings, bioswales, infiltration basins and water gardens – but the most radical conclusion was that the stream should be allowed to resume its natural position within the valley.

This might have been the end of the story, since the finances and logistics of implementing these ideas lay beyond the reach of the artists, no matter how resourceful they had been up to this point. This is the moment when Joan Blaustein earned an honorific nickname from Tim Collins, who dubbed her 'St Joan of the Army Corps'.

Environmental responsibility

In the USA it has traditionally been the Army Corps of Engineers which builds major pieces of infrastructure like dams, locks and canals (they built the Suez Canal). No doubt they have been responsible for many environmentally insensitive projects during their history, but times change and Blaustein was aware of a new federal programme that enabled them to become involved with environmental restoration projects. At first they were unhappy about having to work with a local sponsor, but they were savvy enough to see how much the successful completion of works at Nine Mile Run project would enhance their reputation.

"When it's completed within about two years," says Blaustein, "we will have a tremendous project that's going to do just about everything we envisioned, in terms of restoring the stream into its more natural state, and building wetlands to deal with the extensive storm flows. The sewer lines are being dealt with through another court order to get them cleaned up. It's going to be very good".

Commentators may wonder whether what Goto, Collins and their colleagues have been doing for the last five years is really art, but this is not the most interesting question. It was the studio's position as principled outsiders which enabled them to push the more conventional stakeholders in the direction of the best solution. Why were the city authorities and their highly paid consultants not able to do this on their own? That question should give environmental professionals some pause for thought. □

Dr Ian Thompson, is a lecturer in landscape architecture at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. This article was made possible by a grant from the Small Grants Panel of the Research Committee, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.