

ART PARK

Art Park op-ed, by Cass Turnbull. December 2006

When I read the article in the Dec 24th edition of the PI, in the focus section, titled Cultivation the Waterfront, I was stuck by how totally inaccurate the secondary (page e-3) headline was. It read **PARK: Art of planting lies in designer discipline**. That may be a true statement but no discipline was shown in the planting of the new Waterfront Sculpture Park. The exact opposite, in fact, is true. As a lifelong Seattle resident, I was tickled to see the sculptures start showing up. As a thirty-year maintenance gardener and founder of PlantAmnesty, I was especially delighted to see the metal tree. But when the real trees went in, I was shocked. Whereas most designs, those of both homeowners and landscape designers, are commonly over planted by about two to three times as many shrubs and trees as the land can successfully accommodate, the art park, at least what I can see from Elliot and Western, is over-planted with trees *fivefold* more. And whereas many of the native plants chosen would suit a stream bank or green belt, I consider many of them poor choices for a waterfront sculpture park

The article's author Ian Robertson-- a well-regarded L.A. (Landscape Architect) -- paints a lovely picture of the future evolution of the plantings of the park. I predict a different series of events: The closely planted trees will almost immediately result in complaints about blocked water views. In three years, they will also obscure the viewing of the sculptures themselves. In five years, the conifers planted on 15-20-foot centers will utterly crowd and shade out the deciduous trees which were planted in between them. More complaints and requests to do something will result in mal-pruning or removal of trees, the ones taxpayers paid a lot to purchase and install not long ago. Tree lovers will be upset if any attempt is made to do so.

The 'native dogwoods'--if they are our western dogwood, *Cornus nuttallii*-- will defoliate in the summer from anthracnose, people will complain if they are sprayed. Those dogwoods are among my favorite trees but they are no longer recommended in the trade because they are tragically ravaged by this disease. The remaining over-planted trees--firs and aspens-- will not feel like a pleasant grove but an undifferentiated mass of crowded green stuff on skinny trunks-- a situation will exist where a person 'won't be able to see the trees for the forest.' No enjoyment there. A similar over-planting on the top of the parking garage across from husky stadium continues to dissatisfy to this day, but it's been fun to watch. An attempt to 'thin the grove' of aspens will stimulate the roots to spread and colonize the 'open fields'. Aspens have the rare ability to sprout saplings from their extensive root systems, (the largest above-ground living organism on the planet is an aspen grove that arose from one tree). Those saplings will be impossible to stop. The other plantings also present possible problems. I'm not sure I would enjoy 'the jostle of firs, spruce, and cedars' as they duke it out 'with alders' which will themselves be seeding prolifically in every imaginable open space and sidewalk crack.

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But the maintenance nightmare will have just begun.

The native under story mix sounds great for a green belt, but hard to control and maintain in an urban, art park setting. I like the sounds of huckleberry, Oregon grape, salal, red currants and beach grasses. But add to that mix the thorny Nootka rose and the aggressive, inexorably spreading carpet of snowberry and you've got trouble again. The article's author likes the idea of 'impenetrable, fine twigged masses'.

But do people really want to 'push through the tangle' to get to the water's edge? I suspect that in twelve years the resulting thicket will be so unmanageable that it will be abandoned by frustrated maintenance crews only to be claimed soon thereafter by blackberry, wild clematis and those uninteresting alders.

In the end the trees and the under story will take the blame of a failed park, which is a shame since it is never the plant's faults-- there are no bad plants just ones sited in wrong places.

How could it be that landscape architects make over-planting and mis-siting errors, again and again? You see, it's a characteristic failing of the profession frequently expressed nationally by the people who have to live with their designs. Well, because it is **what they are taught to do** in Landscape Architecture school. I cheered, as did arborists across the country, when the LA text book Trees in Urban Design (1980) went out of print. The author, Henry F. Arnold, made a passionate, articulate and above all else, **convincing**, albeit wrong, argument for close spacing of trees. He even encouraged planting large-growing trees under power lines. (our own City Landscape Architects are still using tax dollars to plant large trees under power lines--called 'maximizing planting spaces'. Later, rate payers are paying to cut their limbs out of wires, and then, under a different program, we pay to have 'inappropriate trees' removed and replaced with smaller growing varieties.) Insane? You bet. The result of triple planting trees has been generations of mal-pruned trees and contentious fights over trees across the county. I've seen many first hand, in many cities. You may recall the recent bro-ha-ha at Occidental park when local businesses insisted that the city remove some of the over-planted Plane trees there, a typical outcome from a typical Arnold design.

Unfortunately, the book has been reprinted recently--and impressionable LAs are proceeding once again to over-plant and mi-site trees, un-heeding of all advice and evidence to the contrary.

I like plants, parks and green spaces; personally, I want to see a lot more of my tax dollars spent acquiring new spaces and maintaining existing ones. But I really hate to see my tax dollars wasted on 'improvements and new designs' that will not hold up, that will self-destruct. Some even require the removal of that increasingly rare commodity--mature

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trees in the downtown area -- as the proposed new redesign of City Hall park does.

Meanwhile new plantings of shrubs and ground covers are ruined through a simple lack of weeding (center strip on 3rd Ave NW and the Dravus street interchange are two examples). Soon it will be time to remove and replace again. More money. And, as a national statistic, one in four of our newly planted street trees will die for lack of water or improper planting or care. It's time that City representatives solicit input from those who have experience in long- and short-term maintenance and sustainability of green spaces. Maybe they should be given veto power over proposed designs.

I have concluded that the most dangerous thing for taxpayers, ratepayers and for the trees themselves is a well-meaning Landscape Architect with a vision. I hope I'm wrong about the waterfront sculpture park. Maybe it will work out okay, somehow. I give it a 50/50 chance. I guess only time will tell.