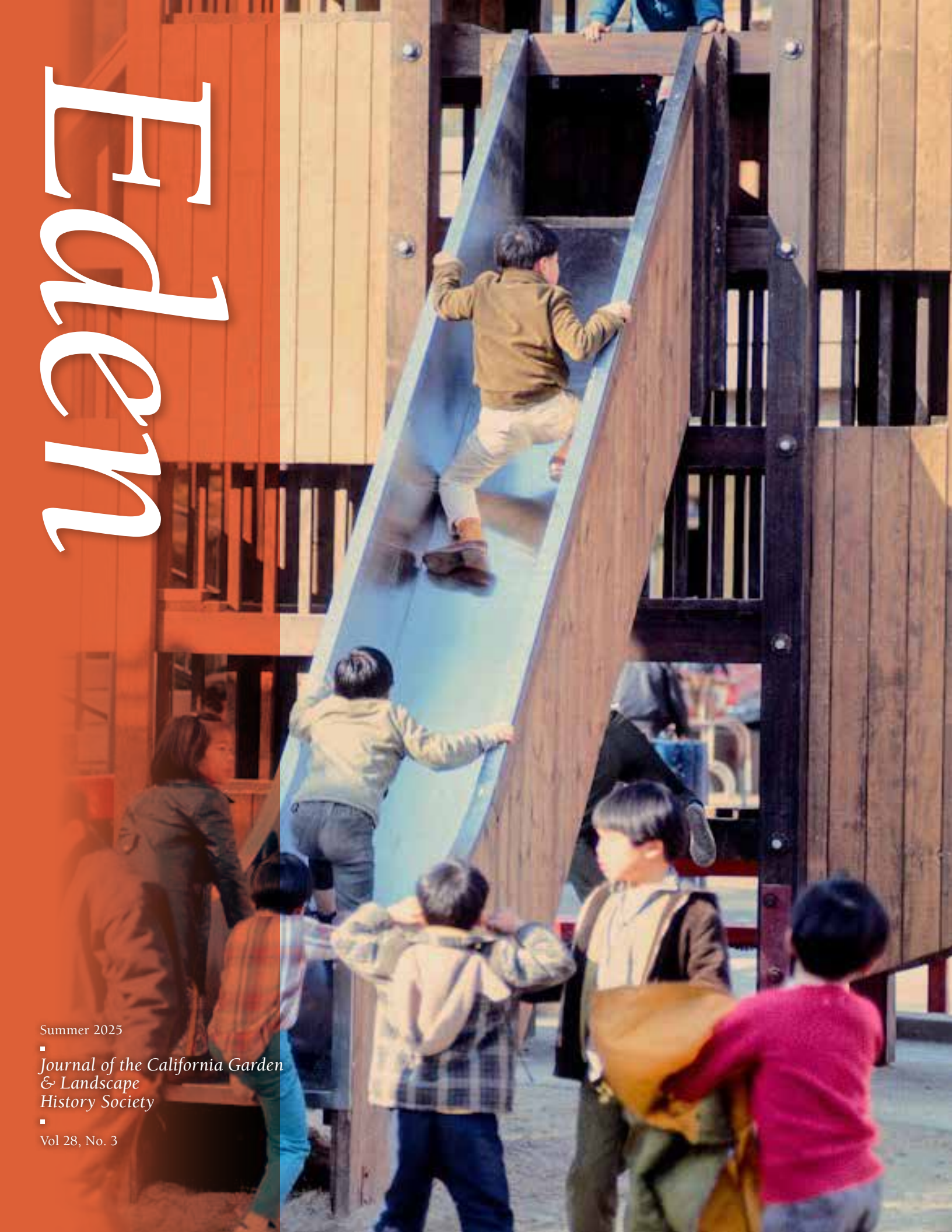


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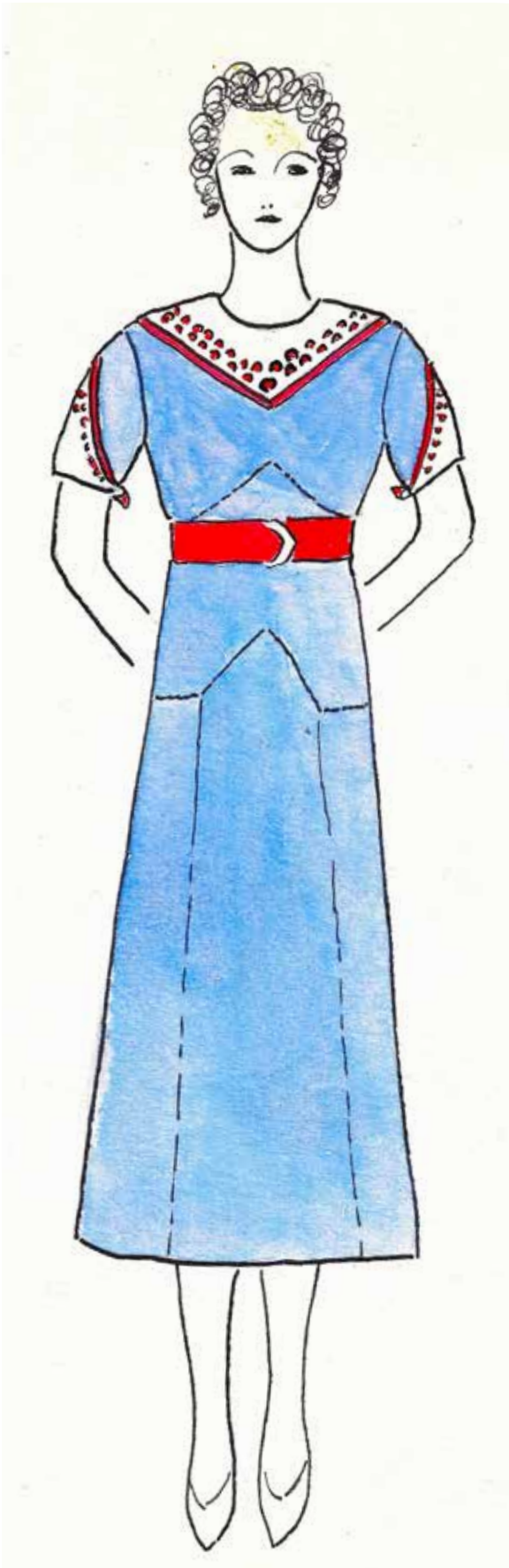
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Dress design by landscape architect Kathryn Stedman, circa 1935. D. Warner North Collection.



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Above: This playground area was designed by Kathryn Imlay Stedman for the 1956 *House Beautiful* Pace Setter House. Maynard L. Parker, photographer. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

PLAY TIME: PLAYGROUNDS AND PLAY STRUCTURES IN SAN FRANCISCO'S PUBLIC PARKS

CHRISTOPHER POLLOCK

Children playing in a sand pile at the intersection of Pine Street and Grant Avenue in Chinatown, circa 1910, just steps from St. Mary's Square, which did not yet have a playground. Courtesy California Historical Society.



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Part One: How Public Playgrounds Started in San Francisco

Introduction

As Historian-in-Residence for the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (R&P), part of my role involves identifying materials that should be archived in the History Center of the San Francisco Public Library. Since beginning this position in 2016, I have discovered remarkable collections hidden away in the department's various facilities—from attics and pump houses to closets, file drawers, trailers, and storage rooms. Each location has yielded surprising glimpses into the department's rich institutional history.

My first significant discovery consisted of sixteen cardboard filing boxes that had been stored in a warehouse for several years. With materials dating from the 1930s to the 1990s, these boxes contained folders with information on most of the department's properties. While the manila folders held valuable internal documentation, the photographs proved most revealing. Many parks constructed after World War II had been systematically photographed upon completion, capturing details about their original appearance—particularly significant since many have changed considerably over the decades. As I examined these files, I noticed striking

differences in playground equipment: some featured distinctive Modernist designs while others displayed more conventional apparatus. This variation sparked a compelling question: what inspired such a dramatic shift in playground design philosophy? This discovery launched my investigation into the development of San Francisco's public playgrounds, with particular attention to the fascinating play equipment of the Modernist era.

Background

Playground design emerged not from landscape architecture but from social reform and child development movements, eventually becoming part of the landscape architecture profession's design vernacular. San Francisco's public playgrounds reflect the nation's playground design evolution, particularly in playground equipment—self-propelled devices like swings and spinners, climbing and sliding apparatus, and sandboxes where children's imaginations flourish. This examination traces the historical background starting with the American progressive era and leading to the twentieth-century's international Playground Movement and its local



implementation, culminating in a mid-twentieth century Golden Era of innovative concepts.

The modern children's playground traces its origins to the educational philosophy of German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), whose nineteenth-century curriculum continues to influence early childhood education today. When Froebel established the first kindergarten in 1837, he pioneered more than just organized early education—he conceptualized designated outdoor play spaces as essential environments for developing children's social, emotional, and cognitive abilities. His academic approach emphasized hands-on learning through self-directed or "free" play, using simple, natural materials readily available in the environment. Sand emerged as a particularly valuable medium, allowing

children to engage in open-ended exploration through digging, molding, and creative construction.

The Playground Movement gained momentum as part of broader social welfare reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Danish immigrant Jacob Riis (1849-1914) emerged as a crucial catalyst for change through his pioneering work as a social reformer, photographer, and journalist. His 1890 exposé *How the Other Half Lives* brought the harsh realities of urban poverty into public consciousness, documenting living conditions that shocked middle-class readers. While Riis focused primarily on housing and sanitation, his revelations about children's environments indirectly heightened awareness of educational needs and juvenile delinquency prevention.

Above: Children playing in a San Francisco street circa 1900. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.



Joseph Lee (1862-1937) translated this growing social consciousness into direct action for children's recreation. A social worker, author, and philanthropist, Lee founded and led the Massachusetts Civic League from 1897, later serving as president of the National Recreation Association beginning in 1910. His passionate advocacy for playgrounds became legendary, earning him lasting recognition including a San Francisco recreation center named in his honor and annual citywide school events celebrating his contributions to child welfare.

The convergence of reformers like Riis and Lee created momentum for a national movement. This effort crystallized in 1906 with the formation of the Playground Association of America (PAA), developed jointly by Washington, D.C.'s playground system and New York City schools. The organization's prestigious leadership reflected the movement's growing influence: President Theodore Roosevelt served as honorary chairman, lending governmental credibility, while Jacob Riis held the honorary vice presidency. Joseph Lee assumed the presidency, joined by board members including San Franciscan Laura Lyon White and William Kent, who maintained residences in both Kentfield, California, and Chicago.¹ The PAA articulated clear principles that would guide playground development nationwide. The organization declared that "play under proper conditions is essential to the health and the physical, social and moral well-being of the child," making "playgrounds a necessity for all children as much as schools." Equally important, they argued that since playgrounds were essential to children's welfare, they "should be constructed on land owned by the city and operated at the expense of the same"—establishing the strong precedent for public funding of recreational facilities.²

Rise of the Playground Movement in San Francisco

The concept of children's playgrounds emerged in San Francisco discourse as early as 1869, when the *Daily Examiner* discussed the idea, albeit within the context of school curricula. Outside school hours, children played unsupervised in the streets and vacant lots, as schoolyards remained inaccessible after classes.³

This situation prompted Health Officer John L. Meares, M.D. to address the Board of Supervisors in his 1885-86 report: "A subject of great importance, and one which, so far as I know, has never received proper, if any, consideration, is the necessity of furnishing suitable play-grounds for the 70,079 minors of the city between the ages of five and eighteen years of age. By your ordinances these children are not permitted to congregate either in the streets or on vacant lots and actually have no places of resort suitable for those amusements so necessary for the promotion of health and pleasure."⁴

As juvenile delinquency emerged as an issue within the broader "child saving" reform movement, progressives recognized that young offenders—previously treated as adult criminals without differentiation—possessed rehabilitation potential due to their developmental capacity. They viewed public playgrounds as preventive solutions where children could socialize and learn through structured, supervised play. Ironically, the West Coast's first public playground resulted from abandoned monument plans. When robber baron William Sharon's (1821-1885) executors designated \$50,000 for a marble memorial gateway in Golden Gate Park, superintendent William Hammond Hall persuaded them that a children's project would better honor Sharon's legacy. Funding for construction shifted to the Sharon Quarters for Children, which opened December 22,



1888, with Hall designing the playground and Assistant Superintendent McLaren overseeing implementation.⁵ Initially featuring open lawns with bench seating, the Sharon Playground offered sex-segregated athletic areas for baseball, croquet, and lawn tennis. The main section provided goat-drawn carts, donkey rides, and a merry-go-round, later expanding to include numerous gondola swings.⁶ Despite this success, historian Randy Delehanty noted that “the Park Commission was mainly interested in passive recreation for adults, not active play for children,” limiting further development.⁷ Activist Sarah B. Cooper, who established San Francisco’s first free kindergarten, emphasized the urgency in 1893: “we do not get hold of the little children [with hereditary tendencies] of vice and crime soon enough.”⁸ Cooper is memorialized in Golden Gate Park next to the Sharon Building.

Smaller-scale initiatives began in 1897 when Board of Supervisors Chairman Devaney instructed park gardeners to create sand piles where “the little tots could play” and to remove “Keep off the Grass” signs in areas designated for children.⁹ An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* cited the same supervisor as promising swings to be installed in these parks, as well. A pivotal moment came later that year when women gathered at activist Laura Lyon White’s home to form

the California Club.¹⁰ Socially well-connected, White fought for women’s suffrage, juvenile justice reform, improved sewer systems, and more. Out of this conclave, the California Club was organized during a time of burgeoning women’s clubs and social reform.¹¹ As its first president, White led the organization to carry out a variety of civic projects through their committees that included the Civic Department, Social Science Department, Educational Department, and Outdoor Art League. Later she was also the first woman to be named to the city’s Board of Education.¹²

The club’s first of many altruistic ventures was a public playground in the Nob Hill District. They secured a three-year lease from the Board of Education for a site previously occupied by Girls’ High School, which had succumbed to fire. The playground’s construction was aided by the Merchants Association and many firms actively donated materials. Opened December 24, 1898, this supervised playground featured handball, boxing, horizontal bars, weights, swings, and sand piles, with administration eventually transferred to the Board of Education.¹³

For all its attractions, the Sharon Playground had a flaw in its location. It was far from where most people lived, especially the working class. The California Club’s advocacy prompted the Board of Supervisors to

Opposite: Proposed gateway to Golden Gate Park by Sharon Estate executors, which was scuttled. Courtesy *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 26, 1886, 5.

Above: Sharon Quarters for Children as developed by 1894. Courtesy Greg Gaar, Administration.



Above: This early version of the sandbox was in the North Beach Playground (now DiMaggio) near the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Lombard Street. Courtesy San Francisco Recreation and Park Department.

appropriate \$12,000 in 1901 for the first truly municipal playground. South Side (later Crowley) playground, located south of Market Street and administered by the Board of Education, opened on April 5, 1902.¹⁴ *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported “thousands of children” swarmed the facility, testing gymnasium equipment including rings, rope ladders, trapeze, swings, slides, seesaws, and sand piles. White served as the guest of honor.¹⁵ That same year, the San Francisco Turn Verin Association, a German fraternal athletic organization, held on-site classes teaching proper use of the playground’s extensive gymnastic apparatus to both boys and girls. Despite only having two playgrounds, the Board of Supervisors passed a 1903 ordinance prohibiting street ball-playing, with maximum penalties of \$500 fines or six-month jail terms.¹⁶ It is probably no accident of timing that New York City’s first municipally built playground, Seward Park, was an influence, as it had just officially opened that year after being acquired for that purpose in 1897.¹⁷

Establishing the Playground Commission

A North Beach playground was planned in 1903 with a \$244,000 bond issue, though development stalled for years. Additional funding came through a 1904 bond issue of \$740,000 for purchasing playground lands, followed by 1905 Board of Supervisors approval under Mayor Eugene Schmitz. After the PAA formed in 1906, San Francisco politicians finally moved to create a dedicated playground administration. With Laura White and William Kent serving on the PAA board, local political influence was substantial. The San Francisco Playground Commission was established in 1907, alongside the existing Park Commission, approved by 88 percent of voters through a Charter Amendment empowering mayoral appointments. The seven-member board included two women, five men, and a secretary. Park Superintendent McLaren served on both commissions, ensuring continuity across the two bodies. White and Margaret Hayward became the first women board members; Hayward is memorialized by a

Western Addition playground bearing her name.

The 1906 Earthquake and Fire devastated North Beach, delaying the newly appointed commission's first playground development until the Board of Supervisors approved the site on December 31, 1907, via Resolution 1749. Assembled from ten parcels costing \$243,500, the North Beach Children's Playground soft-opened its boys' section March 25, 1910, featuring gymnasium, handball courts, basketball court, volleyball court, pools, and shower rooms.¹⁸

A 1908 *San Francisco Call* article reflected the playground movement's philosophy: "The playground, in its broadest sense, is the compliment to the school. It rounds out, equalizes, completes, and balances the proportions of theory and fact."¹⁹

Within a few years the *San Francisco Chronicle* touted that "San Francisco is reaping very direct benefits through the operation of playgrounds. The lessening of juvenile crime is conceded to be a result of the influence of these municipal "back yards."²⁰

In its first decade, there was direct cooperation between the Playground Commission and the city's Board of Education. The Commission oversaw the playgrounds of the many schools throughout the city. For example, in 1916, the School Board granted permission to the Playground Commission to operate playgrounds in nineteen schools across the city.²¹ Later some public playgrounds were created on municipal real estate previously earmarked for school buildings.

Formation of the Recreation and Parks Commission

In 1926, Josephine Dows Randall (1885-1968) coauthored a data-driven report "Character Building Resources: a study of the recreational opportunities and facilities provided by agencies affiliated with the Community Chest of San Francisco" with

E.P. Von Allmen and Esther De Turbeville. Sonoma County native and Stanford University graduate Randall previously worked in San Diego, becoming the city's first playground director. She also was instrumental as an organizer of the earliest Girl Scout and Camp Fire Girl troops in the United States. As a consequence, Randall was hired as Acting Superintendent of Recreation for \$4,000 annually, here she expanded programming to reflect San Francisco's diverse immigrant communities.²² Randall's energy spurred the Playground Commission to increase its involvement by sponsoring a schedule of culturally diverse programs, which reflected the backgrounds of the many émigrés residing in San Francisco. By 1928 the department sponsored programs that included athletics, handicrafts, drawing, painting, social recreation, dramatics, dance, including folk dancing, and music. A 1931 listing of every endeavor totaled seventy-nine different activities.²³

The entity became the Recreation Commission in 1931, reflecting expanded responsibilities and mirroring the PAA's name change to include "recreation." Randall's major initiatives included conceiving and launching a junior museum in 1937, which continues to this day as the Josephine Randall Junior Museum in San Francisco's Corona Heights District. By 1939, the commission operated fifty playgrounds on 209 acres and twenty-five school yards, establishing interdisciplinary coordination between police beat officers, school principals, relief investigators, probation officers, and a Coordinating Council addressing juvenile delinquency.²⁴

Following McLaren's death in 1943 and an efficiency initiative, the Recreation Department merged with the Park Department in 1950, forming today's R&P Department. Randall retired with the merger, allowing new leadership to guide the unified organization.



Above: Portrait of Laura Lyon White. Courtesy California Woman's Home and Club Journal.

Part Two: Play Structures in San Francisco Playgrounds

Playground equipment—termed “playground apparatus” in the early twentieth century—served as one of several recreational tools employed alongside organized programs. Designed pragmatically to meet straightforward needs, early equipment utilized basic materials: metal pipe and castings, as well as formed sheet metal, and wood components. Aesthetic considerations held little importance; instead, designers prioritized the visceral experiences of thrill, speed, and elevation. Safety was not always high on the list of design criteria.

A distinctive late nineteenth-century playground apparatus was the wooden boat-form or gondola-style swing that accommodated up to four children. Unlike conventional swings, this apparatus functioned more like a glider, suspended from two axes rather than a single point. Children could propel themselves using body momentum, creating the exhilarating sensation of flight. This detail of an 1892 stereoview is in the Sharon Quarters for Children (now Koret) in Golden Gate Park. The photograph also shows the playground’s first carousel, which was under a fabric tent structure. Today a temple form building, constructed in 1892, occupies the same site and encloses

another historic carousel.

With the completion of the Playground Commission’s inaugural project, the North Beach playground offered diverse equipment including swings, seesaws, slides, and trapezes. An exceptional amenity was the pair of open-air swimming pools—one for each sex—financed through an ingenious arrangement. San Franciscans remained acutely conscious of emergency water sources following their catastrophic failure during the 1906 disaster. Officials justified the pools as potential cisterns for firefighting, enabling another agency to fund part of their construction. The playground’s strategic location near the Telegraph Hill Settlement House reinforced its role as part of a broader social welfare initiative spearheaded by women.

The playground area of Fleishhacker Playfield, which opened in 1925, marked the genesis of today’s San Francisco Zoo. Its amenities included a massive open-air salt-water pool, animal rides, a carousel, and a miniature working train. Among the play equipment stood a distinctive double-corkscrew slide, with each side spiraling down in opposite directions. Manufacturer C.W. Parker Amusement Company (1894-1955) proclaimed it “the only one in the world” in



their advertising, though they also produced a single-corkscrew version for Sharon Playground in Golden Gate Park. This montage photograph captures additional Parker rides at the playground: an airplane, Ferris wheel, and merry-go-round.

For decades, playground equipment standards and design remained static. Although this photograph of States Street Playground was taken in the late 1940s, it illustrates the functional approach to playground apparatus design that persisted from the late nineteenth century. Metal and wood continued to comprise the primary materials of playground design and construction. While steel could be galvanized or painted, these surfaces inevitably deteriorated. Painted wood proved equally vulnerable to time and decay. Remarkably, most of the equipment shown in this playground survives today in its original location.

Postwar Playgrounds

A transformative cultural shift occurred in 1953. The post-World War II baby boom created both need and demand for fresh approaches to decades-old playground equipment concepts. Recognizing this unique opportunity, the Museum of



Top: North Beach Playground in 1912 featured two swimming pools. Courtesy Annual Report of the Playground Commission, San Francisco, 1912, 18.

Bottom: Illustration published upon the opening of the California Club-sponsored playground in 1898, displaying the various activities. Courtesy The Examiner, December 25, 1898, 1.



Above: The 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition showcased playground equipment in the Palace of Education, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Children's Bureau, established by Congress in 1912. The exhibit featured examples of playground equipment, including a slide and balance beam. Courtesy Bancroft Library, Edward A. Rogers Collection.

Modern Art in New York promoted sculptural design in playground equipment by hosting a design competition in partnership with *Parents* magazine and Creative Playthings Inc., a company specializing in simply designed toys that fostered children's creativity and imagination. Among the jurors was architect Philip C. Johnson, the founding director of the museum's Department of Architecture and Design.²⁵ Johnson would later gain prominence as a leading proponent of the Postmodern architectural movement. The competition's first-place winner was a twenty-eight-year-old painter named Virginia Dortch Dorazio (1925-2010) who designed a modular concrete panel system that could be used to create semi-enclosed spaces. The panels were punctuated with openings of varying sizes and shapes and held together with metal bars that could also be used for climbing the walls. Dorazio's design, called "Fantastic Village," was put into full production by Creative Playthings and featured in their catalog.

With the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition "Playground Sculpture" featuring the competition entries in full swing, the *New York Times* reported that the competition aimed to "stimulate a new approach to the design of equipment in public playgrounds."²⁶ This initiative did not pass unnoticed—in subsequent years,



Left: Josephine Randall as seen on the cover of the 1956 Annual Report of the California Recreation Society News-Prevues surrounded by other recreation professionals.

several manufacturers began producing variations on the groundbreaking exhibit's entries. The competition would exert a lasting influence on playground design's future.

Although the following observation concerned toys, the philosophy paralleled the creation of playground elements. These companies "developed and promoted objects that reflected a growing faith in creativity as an authentic value that could redeem society after the destruction of war and encourage a competitive drive in midcentury America."²⁷

The first San Francisco location to feature a MoMA-sponsored winning design element was Hayes Valley Playground, developed on former church property. Years after the city's purchase and use of the site as a recreation center, the old building was demolished and replaced with a new playground and recreation facility. The 1959 dedication included members of the Hayes Valley Parents' Club, who had organized efforts to secure the new playground's construction. Alongside standard metal pipe structures and the typical cast-in-place concrete hexagonal sandbox, the playground featured a newly designed rounded-top jungle gym manufactured by Game Time Company, established in 1929. Acknowledging the MoMA exhibition were precast concrete pieces called Tunnel Maze, designed by artist and educator Sidney Gordin (1918-1996). Gordin won third

place with this design, which Creative Playthings—founded as a toy company in 1945 by Frank and Theresa Caplan—subsequently manufactured.

One concept that influenced modern playground design originated with Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen, who in the 1930s embraced the use of "junk playgrounds."²⁸ Sørensen focused on creating better living spaces, particularly for urban children. Any materials could be utilized—over time, castoff oil drums, tires, boards, and telephone poles were employed to construct playgrounds that invited unstructured play while encouraging creativity, problem-solving, and physical activity. These improvised constructions, unbound by formal design principles, later became known as adventure playgrounds.

This philosophy eventually influenced a notable local initiative when approximately fifty students from the University of California at Berkeley's College of Environmental Design collaborated in 1970 to create playgrounds for three low-income childcare centers in Oakland. Their primary building material was recycled telephone poles.²⁹

San Francisco was one of the cities to invest in a new type of park—the mini park, or vest pocket park—with construction beginning through a \$650,000 federal matching grant received in 1968.³⁰



Above: Detail of a stereoview card showing Sharon Quarters for Children in 1891 with a boat swing. Courtesy author.

The city developed unused small parcels, many already in municipal ownership, as neighborhood recreation spaces. Prentiss Mini Park in the Bernal Heights District originated when Supervisor Robert Mendelsohn recommended a steep, undeveloped lot—originally designated as a street in an 1861 subdivision map—as the site for one of several mini parks throughout the city. The park was partially constructed in 1971 using telephone poles as building material for climbing and sculptural elements.

That same year, the Koppers Company of Los Angeles issued a press release celebrating the use of their wood preservative to pressure-treat telephone poles creatively incorporated into several San Francisco playground designs. The company reported that more than 500 treated pieces alone were used in George Christopher Playground. Walter Kocian, the Recreation and Park Department’s landscape architect, endorsed this application.³¹ Years later, it was discovered that such treatments contain potentially toxic compounds.

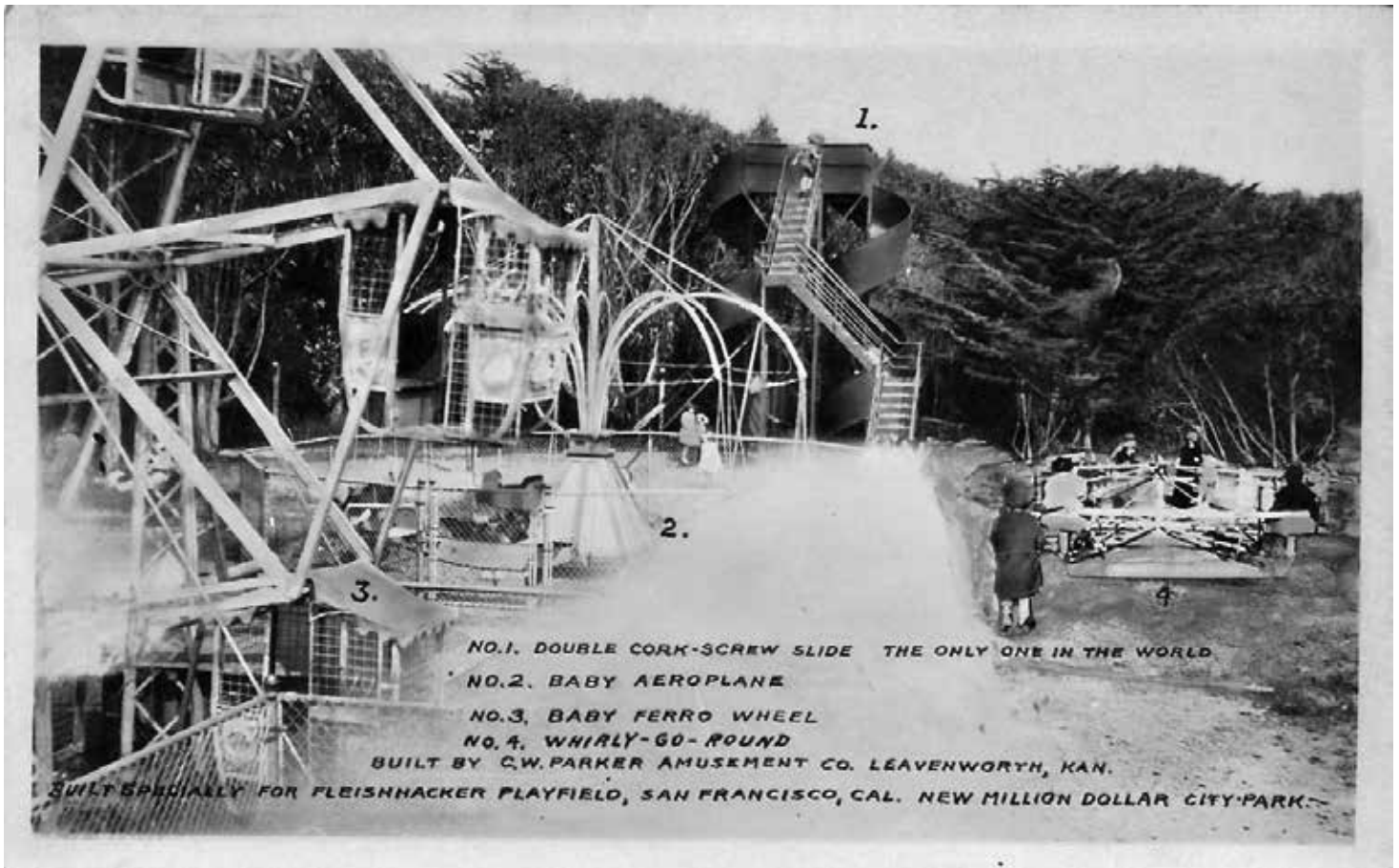
Due to budget cuts, Golden Gate Park in general and the Sharon Playground were becoming an eyesore. In October 1975, the *San Francisco Chronicle* featured an article in its Sunday edition lamenting that “the playground itself is a sorry remnant of a once imaginative Children’s Quarter.”³² Shortly thereafter, Mayor Joseph L. Alioto made



an important announcement: the historic playground would be renovated as a Bicentennial Year project. It was funded partly by donations from citizens Walter Shorenstein and the estate of Lucie Stern, who collectively donated \$90,000 toward the new playground.³³

With this funding, the Sharon Playground was completely redesigned and given a new name: the Mary B. Connolly Playground in tribute to the Park Commission's secretary of twelve years. Local urban designer and landscape architect Michael Painter (1935-2018) designed the facility, which reopened to great fanfare in 1977. The overall layout consisted of several circular areas where specific age groups, from tots to pre-teens, could play. A major signature element was the use of telephone poles as building material. Painter, an alumnus of U.C. Berkeley was certainly influenced by

Above: North Beach Playground in 1913. Courtesy Western Neighborhoods Project.



Above: Postcard advertising showing a collage of an installation of Parker apparatus in Fleishhacker Playfield. Courtesy Dennis O’Roarke.

the 1970 project that the students had carried out in Oakland.

During this period, designers explored new and durable materials. Most notably, molded fiberglass and concrete emerged as plastic mediums that could be formed into robust three-dimensional structures. Additional criteria demanded that materials—and any integral coloring—withstand harsh outdoor exposure and repeated use without deteriorating or causing injury. Gilman Playground was initially a Works Progress Administration project from the later Depression era. In 1968, contractor A. and J. Shooter, Inc. received the rehabilitation contract for grading, landscaping, and irrigation improvements. New equipment included an arch-form swing bank introduced by Jamison, Inc. in 1957—a company founded in 1925 in Los Angeles and best known for their Moon Rocket (1958) featured in playgrounds nationwide. This swing set was positioned within a large sand play area alongside a full-figure cast concrete porpoise and a companion play structure in the form of a monumental turtle, both designed by Jim Miller-Melberg of Form, Inc.

The built-out of the only undeveloped San Francisco hilltop occurred with the

creation of Diamond Heights District between 1961 and 1981 as part of federally funded post-World War II urban renewal. The development’s infrastructure included Christopher Playground, named after Mayor George Christopher who championed the project. Opening in 1971, it featured several Modernist interpretations of playground equipment. Landscape architect Walter Kocian of the Department of Public Works designed the playscape, stating that the design was “based on a desire to give children a wide choice of play activities such as climbing, swinging, balancing, jumping and sliding.”³⁴ The majority of the playground utilized telephone poles in various configurations for climbing structures. Sculptural elements included David Aaron’s perforated aluminum Pleasure Dome, also known as “Shell-Ter,” manufactured by Playground Corporation of America, and Jim Miller-Melberg’s cast concrete Saddle Slide and Playwall structures. Additional features comprised a Jamison Arch Swing and a metal circular spinning dish set at an angle, called Space Spinner, produced by The Mexico Forge, Inc. The playground remained virtually intact until 2021, when three sculptural play elements were preserved and repurposed during rehabilitation



as acknowledgment of their significance in midcentury playground design.

Located at the southeast corner of Funston Playground (now Moscone) was this concrete turtle climbing sculpture. It represents forms commonly found in U.S. playgrounds constructed from the 1950s through the 1980s, and San Francisco featured several. A cluster still exists, most notably in McLaren Park near the tennis courts. Another stands in Golden Gate Park's Spreckels Lake, where it serves as a safe sunning island for the terrapins living in the lake. These pieces were designed by Michigan-based sculptor Jim Miller-Melberg (1929-1917), also known as James E. Miller, who founded Form, Inc. in 1960.

An interview with Jim Miller-Melberg appeared in *Michigan Modern: Design that Shaped America*.³⁵ In Miller-Melberg's own

Above: The States Street playground in the 1950s. Courtesy San Francisco Recreation and Park Department.



Above: First Place winning entry by Virginia Dortch Dorazio of MOMA design contest. Courtesy MoMA Archives, New York.

words: "I do not design down to children. I make the best sculptures I can to help design an environment for imaginative play. Good sculpture is as essential to a child's development as good music and good literature." The Sunnyside Playground clubhouse and its adjacent play area were dedicated in 1971, following years of requests dating back to 1947 to establish a playground within the developing neighborhood. Beyond the swings, parallel bars, and merry-go-round, the facility featured wooden telephone poles for climbing. Additionally, sculptural concrete climbing forms were installed, all set in sand. The concrete ensemble of tree forms was designed in 1957 by David Aaron (1924-1984), who was working with Alcoa Aluminum at the time. Aaron, a sculptor, later became design director of Creative Playthings' Play Sculptures Division, which produced the forms known as the Ranger Station. He also designed the playground at the American National Exhibition held in Moscow in 1959, as well as pieces for Alcoa featured in the "Playground of Tomorrow" exhibit at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.

In 1959 the Board of Supervisors approved a plan to convert Portsmouth



Square's placid lawns, bordering the Chinatown District, into an underground parking garage with an urban rooftop park. Portsmouth Square was San Francisco's first public park—more like a town green—surrounded by civic structures. In this dramatic transformation reflecting the city's growth, landscape architect Douglas Baylis was commissioned to design the park, but due to political issues he resigned in 1960. The landscape design commission then passed to Robert Royston (1918-2008) of Royston, Hanamoto, and Mayes. Royston was renowned for his innovative landscape architecture which often employed biomorphic forms. The new square no longer retained its original open, sloped character, as the parking garage roof was terraced into multiple levels. The "tot lot" portion, situated on a lower level, reflected the sculptural play equipment of the era; in this case, all elements featured unique forms.

Above: Exhibition at MoMA of playground equipment designs. Courtesy MoMA Archives, New York.



Above: Tunnel Maze. Courtesy MoMA Archives, New York.

The project was completed in 1963.

The tot lot was renovated as part of a piecemeal approach to improving the park in 1984. The tot lot again was a sculptural feature, this time its enclosure featured six unique concrete animal sculptures based on some of the Chinese zodiac symbols. The figures included representations of a tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, goat, and monkey, each with glass eyes. The artist was Mary Fuller McChesney (1922-2022), commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission. Funding came from the Mayor's Office of Community Development and the Tamarack Foundation. Her unique pieces were free sculpted rather than cast in molds. McChesney drew inspiration from Mayan and Aztec works after living in Mexico for a period. In this work, her blocky and incised style echoes that of artist Constantin Brâncusi, as seen in his sculpture

"The Kiss" (1903).

One inspiration for the era's collective design spirit came from the 1967 Montreal Expo, where Habitat—a groundbreaking concrete modular housing design by Safdie Architects of Boston—was featured. The concept was viewed as a solution for creating high-density housing. The underlying message was that modularity provided unlimited clustering combinations, and this concept was implemented across many scales and forms. One of the period's leading practitioners was architect and designer Richard Dattner (b. 1937) whose mission was to improve playground design. His 1969 book, *Design for Play*, emphasized play's value, child-directed play, and the idea of playgrounds as experiences rather than a collection of objects. One of his modular constructions was installed in the James



Rolph Playground in the Mission District, where children could climb in multiple directions. This typified the new forms of playground equipment emerging in the 1970s and 1980s. This product, known as PlayCubes, utilized modular geometric fiberglass units that Dattner designed in 1969 and dubbed cuboctahedra. These could also be seen at South Park's playground, which also featured a Mexico Forge Space Spinner dish.

The largest playground piece ever installed in a San Francisco playground was featured at Golden Gate Park's Connolly Playground in the early 1980s. This massive modular geometric assembly consisted of pipes attached with hubs and infill panels, resembling an oversized set of Tinker Toys. Created by product systems designer Peter Jon Pearce (b. 1936), the system was

Above: Hayes Valley Playground with its various mid-century play equipment. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Prentiss Minipark soon after it opened in 1971. Courtesy San Francisco Recreation and Park Department.





named Climbing Clusters and included various ancillary pieces. All components were painted metal parts available in a spectrum of colors. The configuration provided numerous interesting spaces for children to clamber through or find enclosure within.

Upon first view, this futuristic assembly resembled a collection of dazzling soap bubbles linked together. Children could crawl on or through the transparent three-dimensional shapes. The climbing apparatus was called the Curved Space System, a modular geometric system also designed by Pearce, who had attended Chicago's Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology and worked in Charles Eames's office. Pearce was the architect who designed the experimental Biosphere II laboratory complex in the Arizona desert. This play system was part of his quest to develop environments patterned after natural structures. The structure, reflecting Buckminster Fuller's influence, was a complex modular system based on the concept of moving through a labyrinth of three-dimensional

diamond molecules enlarged sixteen billion times. (Think of the 1966 sci-fi film *Fantastic Voyage*, where medical staff are shrunk small enough to voyage in a micro-submarine through a person's blood vessels.) Various sized bubble forms were created by assembling metal rods to hubs. The assembled chassis was then mostly enclosed by injection-molded transparent polycarbonate panels; some were perforated to allow air circulation. The individual panels came in a wide variety of shapes and forms to create multiple assemblies. Financed through Open Space funds and donations from the Friends of Noe Valley, the new Noe Valley Courts playground was rededicated in 1981 with this system. The playground was a *pro bono* project by architect Albert Lanier and his wife, artist Ruth Asawa. The system was also installed at Chinatown's Willie Woo Wong Playground around the same time.

Innovations in Play Equipment

San Francisco's public playgrounds have featured some unique play equipment over

Above: Sharon playground as renovated by Michael Painter's design. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



Above: Gilman Playground with Miller-Melberg porpoise climbing sculpture and Jamison arch swings. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

the years, ranging from abstract custom-designed elements to real military surplus. Below are some examples.

The earliest constructed was in 1920 when Supervisor Bay Wooster Taylor announced that three new attractions would be built in the Sharon Playground.³⁶ One was called the Kiddie Kar Coaster, which was mostly created *in situ*. It consisted of a straight inclined track that ran to a hair-pin turn and continued to the final inclined straightaway to the bottom. The ride was built into the playground's south hillside, utilizing the natural topography. A steerable low-slung tricycle ran in the concrete track and could be returned to the top via a mechanical lift.³⁷

Another was the modernized version of the older style wood boat style swing, also seen in the Sharon Playground, is shown



Left: Newly opened Christopher Playground with a variety of equipment. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Below: Saddle Slide and Playwall forms in Christopher Playground. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.





Above: A Miller-Melberg turtle play sculpture in Funston Playground (now Moscone). Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Right: Sunnyside Playground with concrete trees and telephone pole configurations. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.





here in the Fleishhacker Playfield (now the San Francisco Zoo). Its sculptural quality, achieved through formed steel tubing, exploited the pure circular geometric form and reflected the modern styling approach to metal play equipment around the 1940s. This provided a more thrilling ride than the gondola since its swing axis was suspended from a single point. This design only appeared in San Francisco and was probably custom manufactured, but the designer remains unknown.

When there is a steep site, how do you create a playground? What may have been the city's first in-ground play slide, in 1973, was constructed in Seward Mini Park in the upper Eureka Valley District. The 40-foot-long in-ground, side-by-side configuration was fashioned in-place from concrete. Partway up the hill, a terrace with seating serves as the launch space for the slide. The design came from fourteen-year-old Kim Clarke who won a design contest with the help of a neighbor. Neighbors and artist Ruth Asawa

Above: Robert Royston designed this custom lot in Portsmouth Square. Courtesy RHAA.



Above: Zodiac-inspired tot lot in Portsmouth Square by sculptor Mary McChesney. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

of the Art Commission—who emphasized learning through the arts—and her architect husband Albert Lanier were again involved. Other slides can be experienced today in the city at the Koret Playground, Hilltop Park, and Youngblood-Coleman Playground. To achieve the best ride in these slides, a piece of cardboard is used to reduce friction.

Inspired by the Jet Age, many equipment companies produced forms of rockets and other space age related designs. But in San Francisco, due to its location within a nexus of military installations representing most of the country's armed forces, there was a unique opportunity to access the real thing. Several actual decommissioned military jets and boats were placed in the city's playgrounds, gifts of the U.S. Navy's USS





Above: Rolph Playground with Dattner modular form equipment. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.





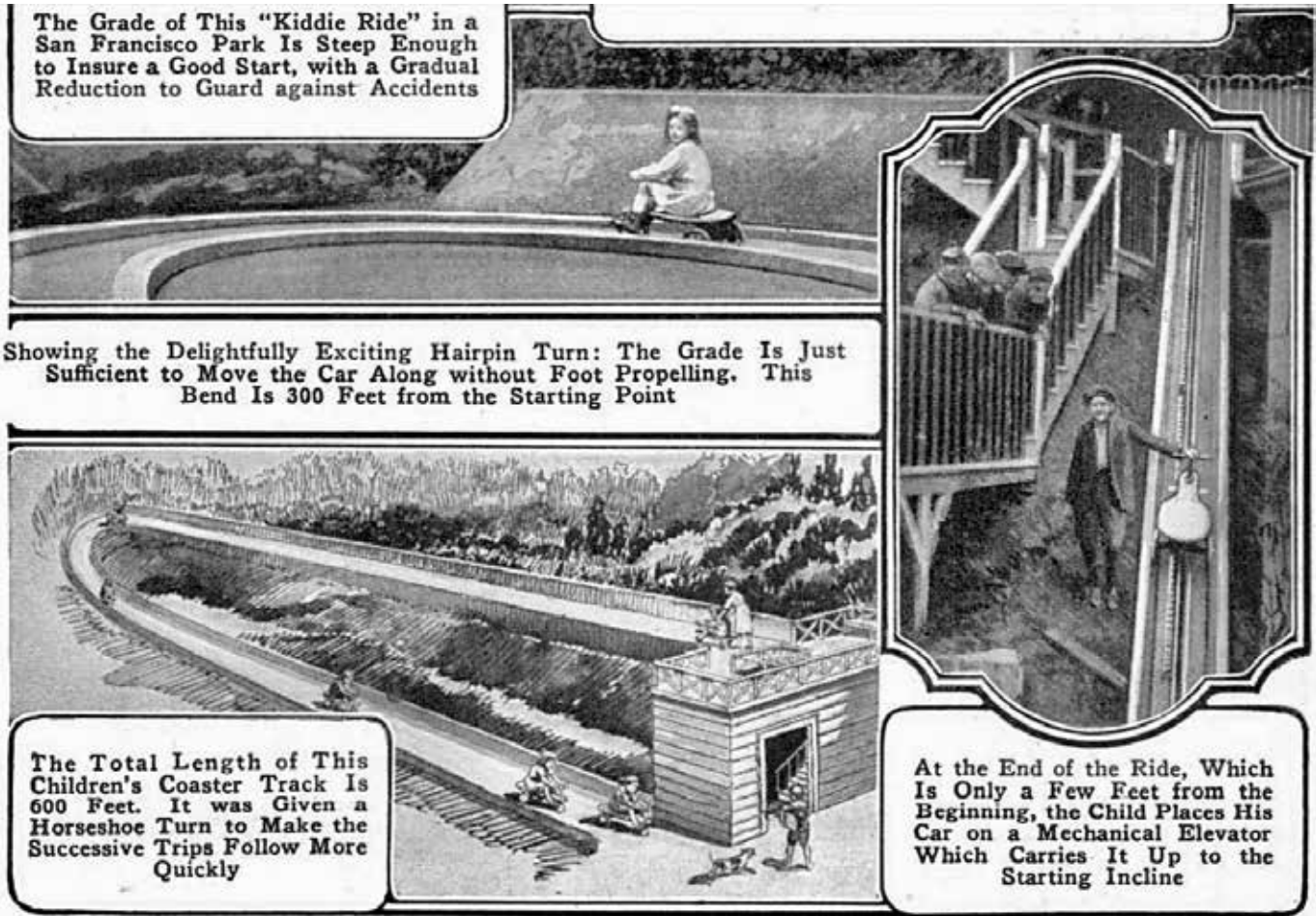
Neighborhood volunteers assembling Curved Space play equipment installed in Noe Valley Courts playground. Courtesy Charles Kennard.



Above: Peter Jon Pearce's Climbing Clusters in the Connolly Playground. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Coral Sea aircraft carrier.

The tradition of having a real decommissioned jet plane in Larsen Park as a play structure began in 1958. R&P General Manager Raymond Kimbell learned of the surplus folding wing jet stationed at Moffett Field and the G.W. Thomas Drayage and Rigging Company volunteered to move the piece to San Francisco.³⁸ Due to wear and tear, a replacement in the form of an F-J Navy jet was procured from the Alameda Naval Air Station and dedicated in 1967.³⁹ That jet was in turn replaced by a Vietnam-era supersonic Vought F-8C Crusader, which was helicoptered into the San Francisco Zoo from the Alameda Naval Air Station and then towed to the park in 1975. A ceremony to present the jet took place the following January 24.⁴⁰ In 1987 personnel from the USS



Carl Vinson restored the aircraft.⁴¹ In 1992 soil testing revealed that lead paint from the jets had contaminated the surrounding soil. In 1993 the jet was moved to the Pacific Coast Air Museum in Santa Rosa where it was fully restored and remains on display.⁴²

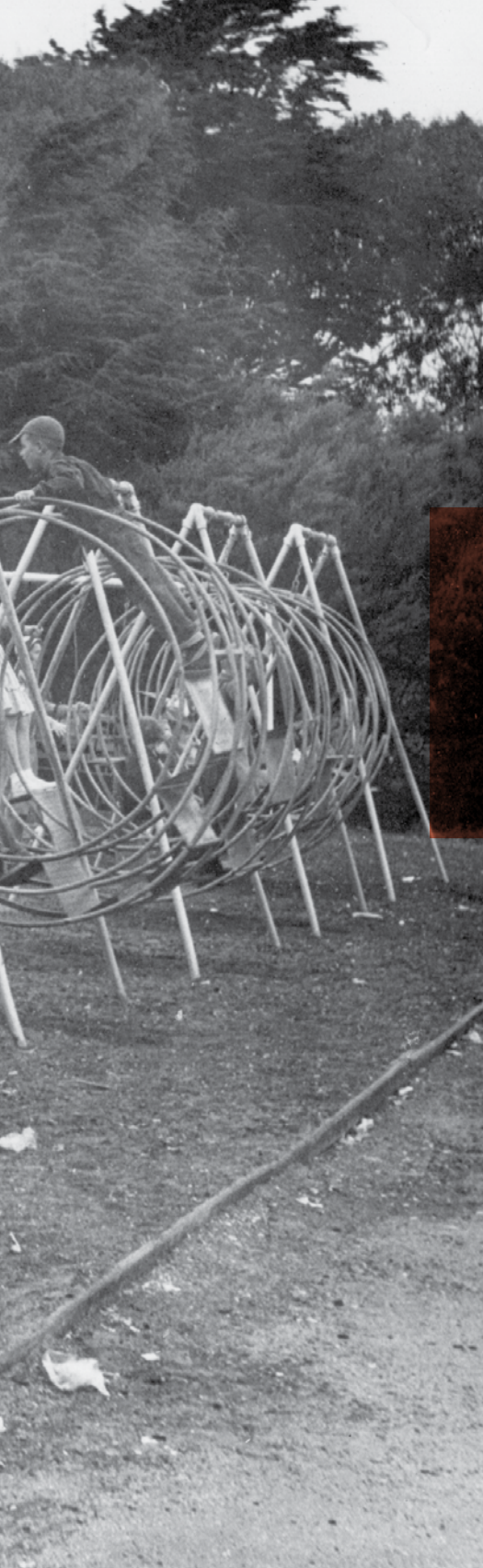
In 1976 a decommissioned F-8 jet plane was installed in Bay View Playground augmenting the existing play equipment. The jet was helicoptered across San Francisco Bay from Alameda Naval Air Station to nearby Candlestick Park and then towed to the playground.

An actual railroad train locomotive represents another piece in this series of real equipment that was donated to the San Francisco Zoo as a play exhibit. In 1957 the obsolete 1294 locomotive and tender, built in 1924, was gifted by Southern Pacific to the Fleishhacker Playground within the zoo.⁴³ Children were able to clamber all over the outside and inside of the locomotive getting a first-hand view of the massive piece of equipment. Any moving parts were removed or welded fast. The piece remained in place until 1981.

Other adult size machines were donated in the spirit of salvaging outmoded

Above: Kiddie Kar Coaster ride installed in the Sharon Quarters for Children. Courtesy *Popular Mechanics*, August 1921, 215..



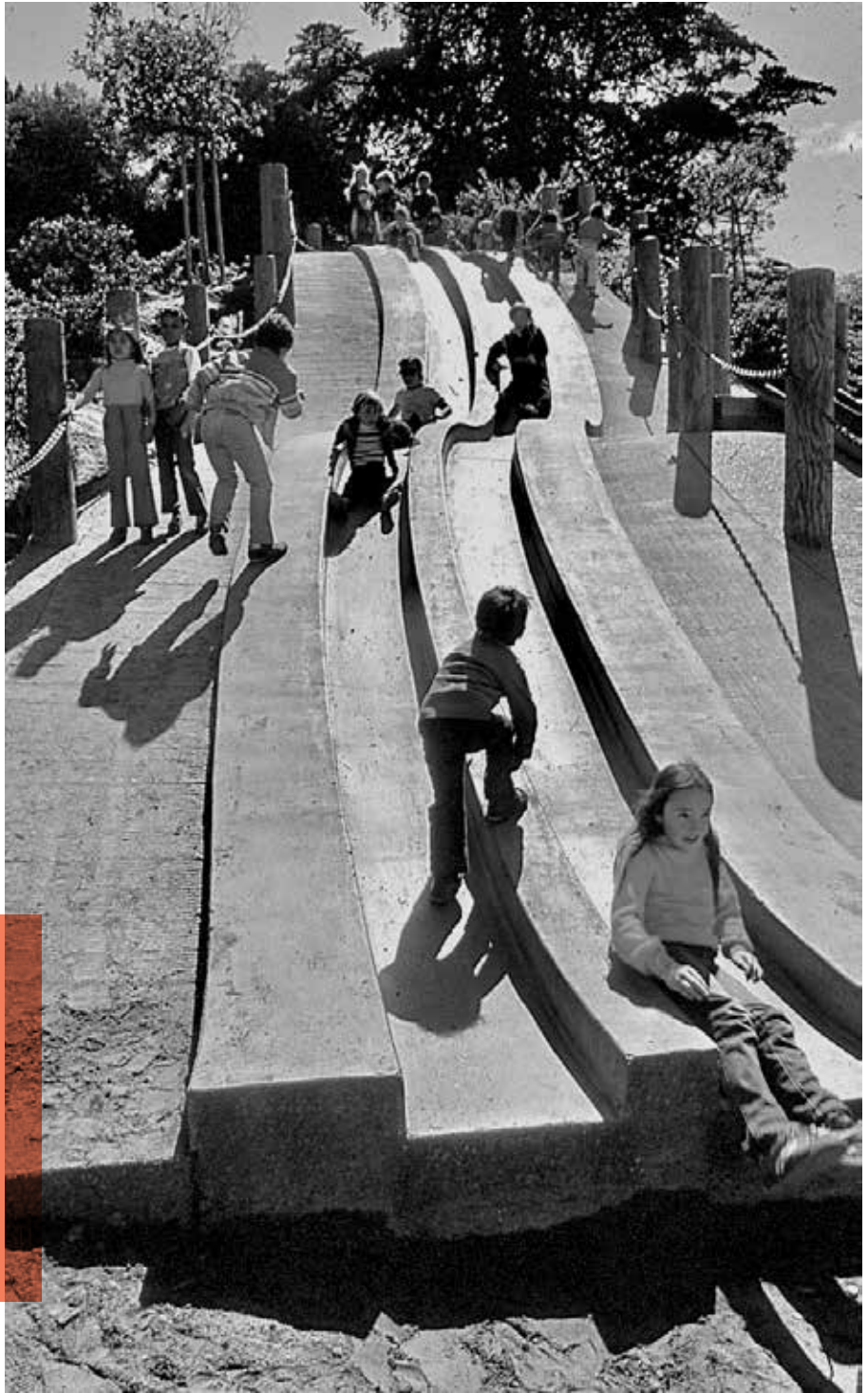


Left: Circular swing design in Fleishhacker Playfield in the 1940s (now San Francisco Zoo).

equipment for playground use. A Seagrave fire pumper wagon was obtained from the San Francisco Fire Department, modified, and installed in Holly Park's playground in 1971. Modifications costing \$2000 were made to make the wagon child friendly.⁴⁴

Mission Dolores Park was gifted a dory that was dedicated in a ceremony in 1975. It was placed in the sand-filled area that was originally a wading pond when constructed in the 1910s. The dory remained in place until 2011, when the park underwent major rehabilitation. Another remains in a Golden Gate Park playground near the intersection of forty-fifth Avenue and Lincoln Way and today is popularly called the Blue Boat Playground.

Like many of the nation's other cities, San Francisco followed the Playground Movement and by the beginning of the twentieth century created public play spaces that reflected the philosophy of the time. Many different influences came into the picture to style what playgrounds could look like, even though the same basic principles of learning and fun have remained.



Right: In-ground slide in Connolly Playground in 1983. Photographer: Robin Lew. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Conclusion

A 1962 article in *Sports Illustrated* magazine, by its Senior Editor Robert W. Creamer, talked about the “transformation [that] has overtaken the country’s playgrounds in the past few years.”⁴⁵ Although his editorial starts out as a what was wrong with the good old days approach, Creamer waxed on about the equipment being aimed at and designed for the child. The concepts stimulate a child’s interest and imagination. He

notes that safety, to a degree, is also beginning to influence the designs.

Most of the equipment shown in these pages has fallen to demolition but some installations have survived as examples of their times. Generally, a R&P Department playground is completely overhauled about every fifteen years due to wear and tear. This provides the opportunity to seek the next new concept or style of playground equipment.



Left: View of the jet in Larsen Park. Courtesy San Francisco Recreation and Park Department.

Below: Bay View Playground with jet. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.





Above: Locomotive 1294 at the Fleishhacker Playground in 1964. Courtesy Boston Public Library, Arts Department.

Opposite: Dory in Mission Dolores playground being dedicated in 1975. Courtesy History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

About the Author

Chris Pollock began his career as a designer specializing in interior architecture. His first position was with The Architects Collaborative and later he spent more than a dozen years with Gensler. With this experience, he changed gears to focus on historic preservation, specializing in historic research. A native of Connecticut, Chris has resided in San Francisco since 1979.

In 2016, Chris was tapped by the San Francisco R&P Department to be their first Historian-in-Residence for all the city's parks, bringing a layer of history to the department. His initial project was to research and record the history of the department's approximately 230 real estate holdings.

His latest publication was *San Francisco's Parks* (Arcadia, 2023), a pictorial survey of the city's parks using historical images. With the 150th anniversary of Golden Gate Park in 2020, he launched the latest version of his book, first published in 2001, *San Francisco's Golden Gate Park: A Thousand and Seventeen Acres of Stories*. This publication, by Norfolk Press, is a hybrid of a history and tour guide of the park's many features. This was preceded by another book, *Reel San Francisco Stories: An Annotated Filmography of the Bay Area*, published in 2013, which covers some 650 movies filmed in the Bay Area since the beginning of talkies. In the works is an extensive history of Golden Gate Park's storied Conservatory of Flowers to celebrate its upcoming sesquicentennial at the end of the decade.



Endnotes

1 Politician Kent donated temporary use of the Chicago land adjacent to Hull House, a settlement house co-founded by social reformer Jane Addams, to build a playground in 1894. It would last sixteen years.

2 Virginia Commonwealth University, Social Welfare History Project website: <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/playground-association-of-america-early-days/>, accessed December 4, 2024.

3 *Daily Examiner*, May 3, 1869, 2. "Spirit of the Morning Press"

4 *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year Ending 1885-86. Health Officer's Report*, San Francisco: W.M. Hinton & Co., 1886, 375.

5 *San Francisco Call*, November 16, 1886, 7.

6 *San Francisco Call*, December 23, 1888, 7.

7 Delehanty, Randolph Stephen. *San Francisco Parks and Playgrounds, 1839 to 1990* (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1992), 286.

8 "History of Child Saving in the United States at the Twentieth National Conference of Charities and Correction in Chicago, June 1893" Boston: George H. Ellis, 1893, 90.

9 *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 21, 1897, 9. "Supervisor Devaney as the Children's Friend"

10 Despite White's views on equality and progressiveness, she opposed racial integration.

11 This organization is not to be confused with the California Club located in Los Angeles, an exclusive private men's club.

12 *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 2, 1909, 5. "Gives Mrs. Lovell White a Place on the Board of Education"

13 *San Francisco Examiner*, December 25, 1898, 10. "Opening of Children's Playground"

14 *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1901, 20. "Board Locates a Playground"

15 *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 6, 1902, 24. "Children Joyfully Welcome the Opening of Their Playground"

16 Ordinance 805, June 11, 1903, Fourth Annual Report of the Playground Commission, 1912, 47. The Sharon Playground was not created using public funds.

17 *New York Times*, November 21, 1902, 1. "New York Under the Reform Regime"

18 *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 26, 1910, 9. "North Beach Playground Thrown Open to Boys"

19 *The San Francisco Sunday Call*, November 1, 1908, 13. "The Passing of the Gang"

20 *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 14, 1913, 4. "The Passing of the Gang"

21 San Francisco Playground Commission, meeting minutes, November 1, 1916, 285.

22 San Francisco Playground Commission, meeting minutes, December 1, 1926, 52.

23 Byington, Lewis Francis, "History of San Francisco, 3 Volumes", S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., Chicago, 1931. V. 2, 181.

24 *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 18, 1939, 12. "S.F. Kids Have Many Places to Play"

25 Press Release from The Museum of Modern Art, "Competition for Playground Sculpture Announced by the Museum," August 3, 1953.

26 *New York Times*, June 30, 1954, 30. "New Play Pieces for Young Shown"

27 *Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture*, Amy F. Ogata, 129. Winterthur Portfolio 39:2/3.

28 Website: <https://www.pgpedia.com/s/carl-theodor-sorensen>, accessed January 31, 2025.

29 *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 1, 1970, 5. "UC Students' Project"

30 *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 13, 1968, 6. "Mini-Parks Get Own Coordinator"

31 Koppers, News Release, March 24, 1971, by George Van Gundy, Director, West Coast Relations.

32 *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 31, 1976, W33. "Here's Hope for a Change in Golden Gate Park"

33 San Francisco R&P Commission, meeting minutes, December 11, 1975, 10.

34 Letter to State Environmental Awards Committee, from Joseph Caverly, GM, January 14, 1972.

35 Website: www.michiganmodern.org, accessed February 8, 2025.

36 *San Francisco Examiner*, November 21, 1920, 10N. "New Joy Providers at Golden Gate Park"

37 *Popular Mechanics*, V. 36, N. 2, August 1921, 215. "San Francisco Park Has New Ride for Kiddies"

38 *News-Call Bulletin*, December 7, 1959.

39 Letter from James Lang, General Manager of R&P Department to Captain D. A. Campbell, Naval Air Station, Alameda, January 31, 1967.

40 San Francisco R&P Department, press release, January 12, 1975.

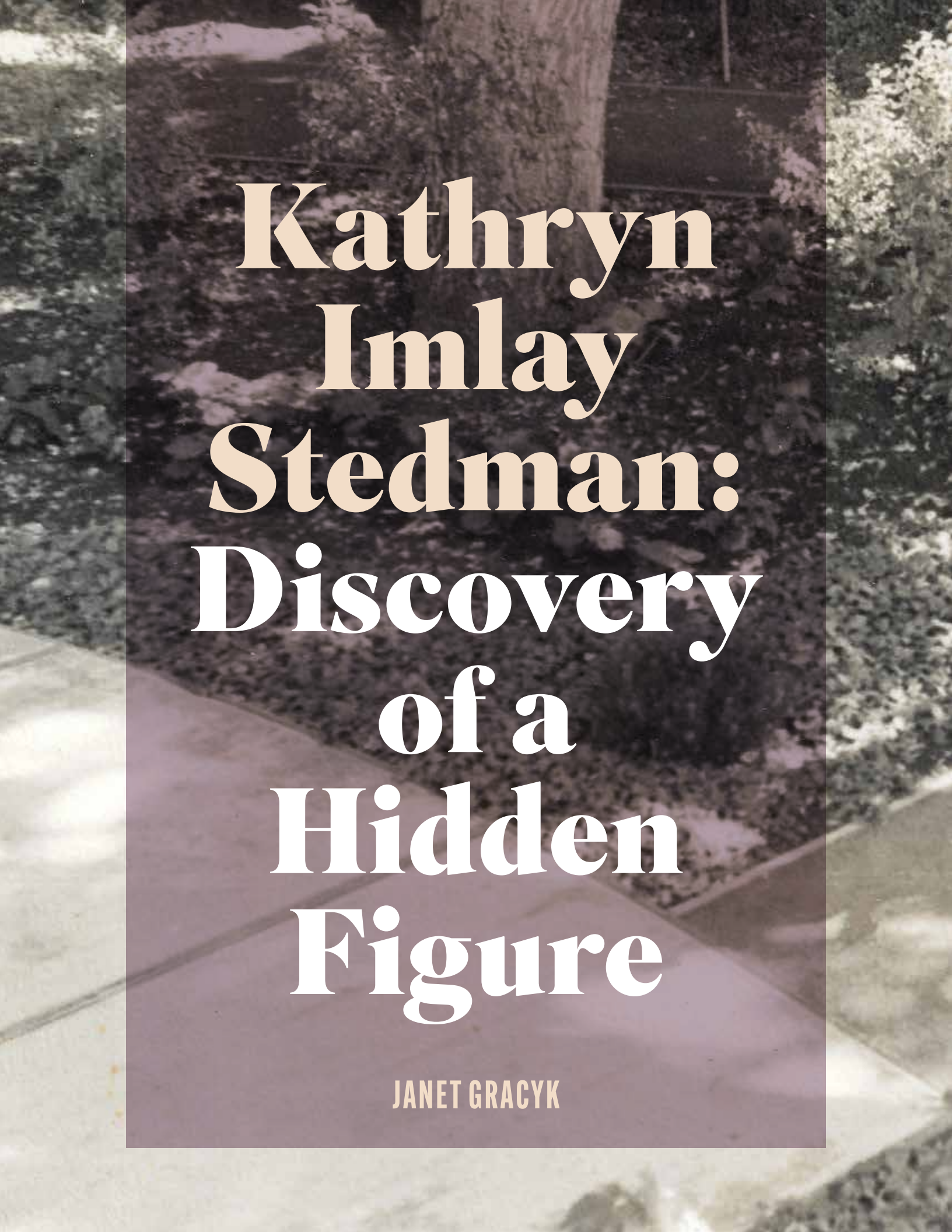
41 *San Francisco Progress*, July 31, 1987, A3.

42 *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 19, 2013, E1. "Plans Taking Off for Park's Plane"

43 *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 30, 1957, 3. "Children Given S.P. Locomotive"

44 San Francisco R&P Commission, meeting minutes, October 14, 1971, 445.

45 *Sports Illustrated*, July 2, 1962. "A New Look at the Sandbox"

A photograph of a tree trunk and a sidewalk with a dark purple overlay. The text is centered over the overlay.

**Kathryn
Imlay
Stedman:
Discovery
of a
Hidden
Figure**

JANET GRACYK



Kathryn in the garden she designed for Joseph and Lilian Eichler, in Atherton; c1958. Photos are from the collection of D. Warner North, unless indicated otherwise.

Introduction: Uncovering a Forgotten Pioneer

In 2017, while touring Joseph and Lillian Eichler's 1950 residence in Atherton, California, I encountered an unfamiliar name. Among the original architectural drawings on display was a landscape plan signed "Kathryn Imlay Stedman." This discovery sparked a journey to uncover the story of this accomplished but largely overlooked landscape architect who helped shape California's Bay Area mid-century modern aesthetic.

Via various archives, interviews, and chance discoveries, I gradually gathered information. I contacted other professionals and scholars. CGLHS member Marlea Graham shared her research. Author Dave Weinstein had written an article for the Eichler Network about the many women who worked for the developer Joe Eichler, and Stedman was among them. I reached out to Dave and this conversation proved fortuitous years later. Historian Katherine Rinehart connected me with Stedman's nephew, D. Warner North, who shared family knowledge and photographs. In late 2024, that earlier connection with Weinstein revealed another Stedman landscape plan for a Los Altos Hills estate, further illuminating her work.

While this article presents substantial information about Stedman's life and accomplishments, the catalog of her landscape projects remains frustratingly incomplete. It is my hope that this research will inspire others to recognize her work and bring more examples of her designs to light.

Early Life and First Career (1900-1942): From East to West

Kathryn Stedman, née Peters, was born in 1900 in Claremont, New Hampshire, and raised in Glens Falls, New York, where she and her three younger sisters enjoyed a comfortable upbringing. She demonstrated ambition and independence early in life. She was named one of the "Daisy" girls at Vassar College, a recognition of her attractiveness, class spirit, and leadership. After graduation in 1922, Stedman launched a successful career in New York City's fashion industry. She worked as sportswear editor for *Women's Wear Daily* before advancing to executive positions at Best and Co. and R.H. Macy. Her career trajectory reflected the growing opportunities for professional women in the 1920s, as well as Stedman's own independent streak.

At age thirty, Stedman gave up her executive career and married engineer Robert Imlay. The couple relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Kathryn opened the Vermont Tweed Shop. She took custom clothing orders, purchasing cloth from Vermont mills and sewing the clothing herself. Census records from 1940 reveal that both spouses were self-employed, with Kathryn earning \$1,000 more than Robert that year. According to family lore, Robert realized he had married a very determined woman who enjoyed more success than he did, and he became unhappy. They were granted a Nevada divorce in the spring of 1942.



The House Beautiful Pace
Setter House of 1956,
landscape by Kathryn Imlay
Stedman. Maynard L. Parker,
photographer. Courtesy of
The Huntington Library, San
Marino, California.



Above: Janet Gracyk getting her first look at the plan drawings for the Eichler home in 2017. Photo provided by Dave Weinstein.

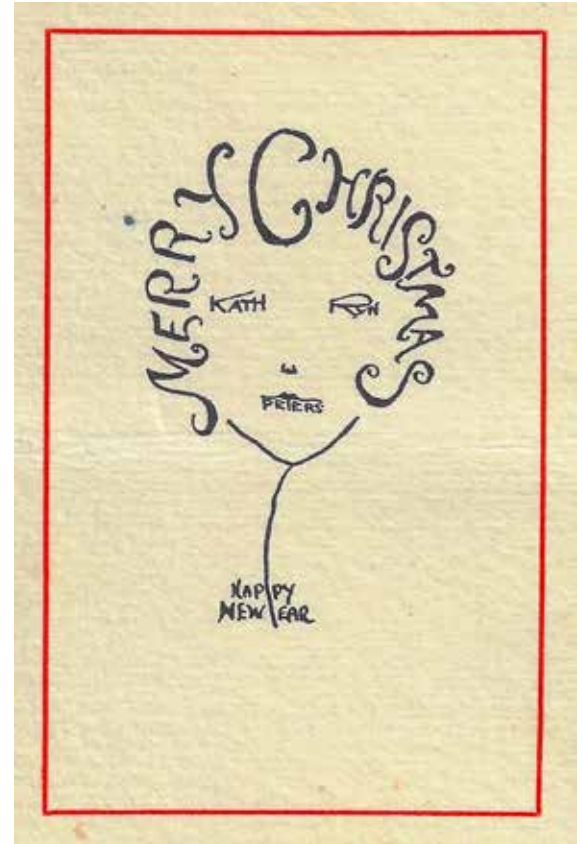
Education and Professional Formation (1942-1947): A New Direction

At forty-two, newly divorced and seeking reinvention, Stedman moved to San Francisco where she enrolled at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design. Schaeffer's curriculum integrated Bauhaus principles with Japanese aesthetic philosophies, particularly emphasizing light, color, and spatial relationships.^(b) This foundation would profoundly influence Stedman's later landscape work.

Following her studies with Schaeffer, Stedman attended a summer course at the Lowthorpe School of Landscape Architecture in Massachusetts. Lowthorpe was created for women to learn landscape design, horticulture, and gardening at a time when women were not admitted to similar college programs. In a 1943 letter to family, she raved about the class at Lowthorpe taught by Josef Albers. She and Albers maintained a friendship throughout the rest of Albers'

life. Stedman said that Albers suggested she pursue a career in landscape architecture. Rather than completing a degree at Lowthorpe, Stedman returned to California around 1944 and enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley's landscape architecture program. University records list her as a graduate student (under the name Kathryn Peters Imlay) from 1944 to 1946.

While still a student, Stedman was recommended to prominent Bay Area landscape architect Geraldine Knight Scott, who hired her as an assistant. Scott thought Kathryn was still somewhat undisciplined and inexperienced at that time but was impressed with her natural talent. Scott created tasks to increase Stedman's technical skills.^(c) This apprenticeship provided practical experience that complemented Stedman's formal education. They prepared plans together, including a modernist landscape for Scott's new Palo Alto office. The two women were



Above: One of Kathryn's handmade holiday cards. This one was likely drawn between 1920 and 1930.

Left: Young Katie at Vassar, circa 1920.

busy but found time to participate in the Association of Landscape Architects (ALA) and they gave talks on garden subjects to clubs and organizations.

**The Scott & Imlay Partnership (1947-1950):
Professional Emergence**

By 1947, Stedman and Scott had formalized their collaboration as the partnership Scott & Imlay. Their work was featured in the

landmark 1948 "Landscape Design" exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Art alongside projects by landscape architects Thomas Church, Robert Royston, and other prominent designers. This exhibition celebrated the innovative approaches that characterized post-war California landscape design—pragmatic solutions using new materials and modern principles that could be applied to the region's rapidly expanding suburbs.



Above: Dress design by Kathryn Stedman, c1935. These are from the period she was an independent businesswoman, designing and sewing clothing. (Warner's mother, Peg North, helped with sewing when the workload was heavy.)

The Scott & Imlay partnership dissolved in 1950, with Scott later explaining that Stedman preferred residential projects over the larger institutional commissions that interested Scott. Despite this professional divergence, they remained friends, and Stedman continued to develop her own practice and design approach.

**The Stedman Design Team (1948-1978):
Creative Partnership**

During her partnership with Scott, Stedman met Harvard-trained architect Henry Morgan Stedman. They began collaborating on projects and married in 1948, forming a powerful creative partnership. They designed and built their house on Tennyson Street in Palo Alto. The couple shared an office and worked together on numerous projects while also maintaining independent practices. Their clientele included wealthy families throughout the San Francisco Peninsula and Santa Clara Valley – an area known today as Silicon Valley.

The Stedmans' pastimes reflected their artistic sensibilities; both were accomplished watercolorists and regularly traveled along the California coast to draw and paint. Their wide circle of friends enjoyed frequent and lively gatherings at the Stedmans' home. North recalls with affection serving appetizers to the writer "Wally" Stegner, a frequent guest and close friend of the Stedmans, and other luminaries from Stanford. Kathryn had a close friendship with the sculptor Claire Falkenstein, dating back to Kathryn's early days in San Francisco. The couple was friends with the Lane family of *Sunset* magazine, as well as many of the editors at the publishing company.

The Stedmans experimented with new materials and construction techniques. They developed a portable "Weather Warmer" patio heater that they advertised (with limited success) in *Sunset* magazine. Many designers were using plastic panels in outdoor and indoor environments at this time as dividers and decorative elements. According

July 21, 1943

Write me back

Dear Mother and Father,

This is the fourth very warm night that I have spent in Cambridge, and my hope is to get out of it as soon as possible. My brain ceases to function in this weather. I am considering very seriously going up to Maine to a water-color school at Goose Rock each where I can collect my thoughts and cool off and get in a little more painting while it is still vacation time. There is apparently some slight chance that Maggie may join me for a little while. I will report further on this in a day or so.

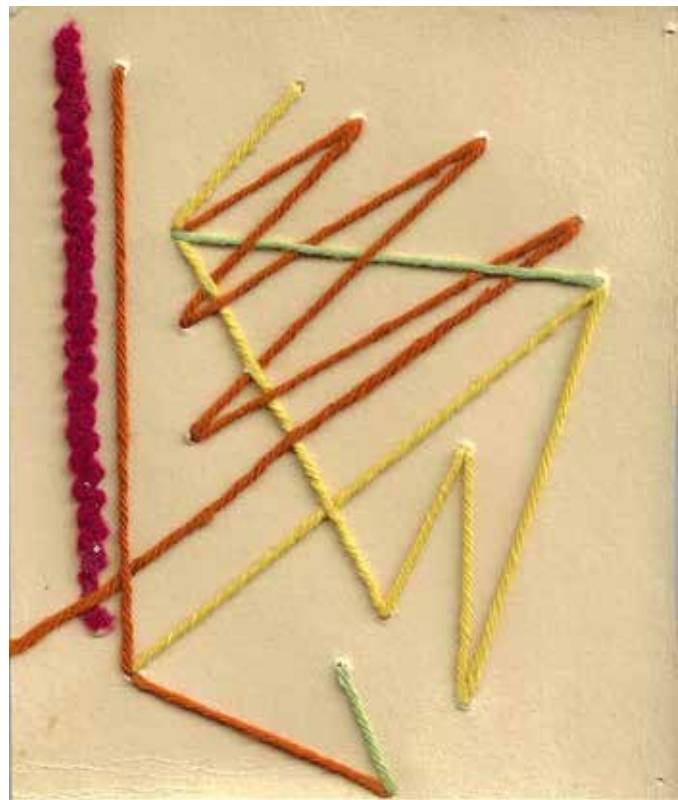
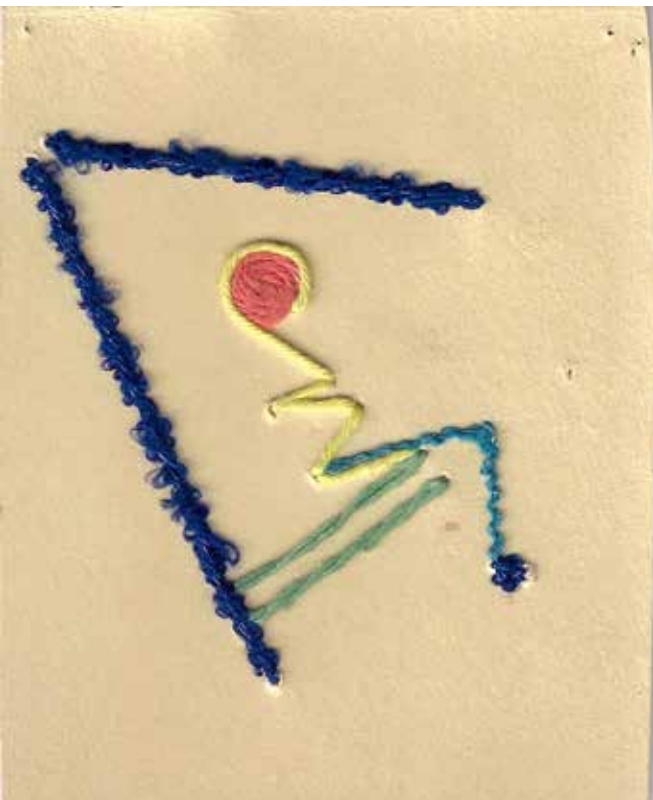
My four weeks at the Lowthorpe School were quite wonderful, although it was beastly hot there, too. The School consists of a large colonial house, and large estate of fields and garden--also a dormitory for 21 girls, and a drafting room, barns and greenhouses. It is a school of Landscape Architecture, the oldest one for women in the country. I had passed it many times on trips up into New Hampshire, but never thought that the day would come when its hospitable atmosphere would have any special meaning for me.

The reason for the good time was largely Mr. Albers the teacher for whose course in abstract design I went up there. He is a German Jew I suppose, anyway has been in this country since '35 teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where his art classes are so popular that they usually include the entire student body. He taught before coming over at the famous Bauhaus, and is closely connected with Gropius of Harvard and others of that group, now nearly all in this country. We all fell in love with him immediately, he is so genuine and enthusiastic and full of fun. The class was a circus of wit and stimulation and also packed full of new ideas. And outside of class, being a grown-up in a group largely of younger girls, I fell into the smaller group who talked and laughed and discussed together up at the Parkers nearly every evening. The Parkers run the school, a couple in their middle thirties. They love talk and music and we had a lot of it, also many parties with outsiders invited in to meet the visiting celebrity. Jack Parker is a darling, and his wife is a dynamo of energy and big-heartedness. Albers is a small man with blond hair, graying at the temples and very keen, very blue eyes, a little bit on the Hitler type in haircut and expression, but far from it in every other way. He is an ardent democrat in his politics, and through his teaching of design is constantly drawing parallels between good design, and the democratic idea, which to him means that "each part serves, and is served" making a whole without a dominant personality necessary.

Jack Parker wants me to come back there this fall and take the course in Landscape Architecture, for which he thinks I am well qualified in my talents. Of course, he is anxious for students, but it is nice to have someone think you would be a good landscapist, and I must confess that I am turning the thought over in my mind, a little. If his school were only in California, I would go in for it in a minute.

Left: Excerpt from a 1943 letter Kathryn wrote to her parents after attending the Lowthorpe School and meeting the artist Josef Albers.

Below: Cards created by Kathryn Imlay (Stedman) around 1943 when she took a course with Josef Albers at the Lowthorpe School. There are six cards in the collection. These two measure 3-1/2" tall by 4-3/8" wide.



“Excerpts from Geraldine Knight Scott, 1904-1989, a Woman in Landscape Architecture in California, 1926-1989: Oral History.”



As soon as materials were available after the war, many clients wanted fences or screens built for privacy. To help Katy and to show our clients, we made models of garden fences out of balsam wood. Katy's creativity produced lovely little models. She studied the effects produced by various spacings of the vertical and horizontal members, with results similar to Japanese fences, not copied, but a natural result of playing with wood.

As soon as we moved the office to Palo Alto, I had to get more draftsmen. Katy wasn't a good draftsman, and neither was she interested in school planning. Katy was only interested in the design of private gardens and designed several charming ones. But I had to employ good draftsmen to turn out the big school plans with written specifications.

In designing the garden for the barn [the new office of Scott & Imlay], which sat in

the middle of a large plot with a wall around it, we used new materials and new ideas. On the east side there was nothing except one beautiful apple tree and weeds four feet high, an indication that the soil was good. On the west side, there was a tall fig tree with beautiful form, a huge daphne, and a few other plant specimens. The boundary wall was red, hollow tile, a horrible-looking thing which we painted a soft grey-green, a pleasing background for plants. We decided to develop a showpiece garden on the studio side --no lawn, of course, low maintenance, raised beds, and a large sand pool bordered with tile.

We set up a mobile over a sand area, a surface to receive the shadow. We didn't want to pave the whole area. Everybody teased us about that. They called it the biggest sand box or kitty parlor in the world. However, this proved to be a very interesting experiment because when people came to see us about designing their gardens, they would

look out and see this mobile hanging over the sand pool. It looked far-out to them and strange. Many asked about it. It was too queer for some.

The conservatives, such as the people who wanted a Cape Cod house and garden, never came back, to our delight. Many eastern people had come in to the area during the war. Our garden was too far-out for them. It became a marvelous sorting gap, selecting those people who had some imagination and would like to employ us. That was a great device. I wish I had had one much later in my practice. When people asked us what we did, we would say we were "space designers." That was a few years ahead of the "space age," or "Space," the landscape architecture student publication at UCB.

Excerpts from *Geraldine Knight Scott, 1904-1989, a Woman in Landscape Architecture in California, 1926-1989: Oral History.*



to nephew North, the Stedmans pioneered a technique for creating laminated plastic panels with embedded organic materials. North occasionally helped his aunt and uncle produce these in their backyard workshop in Palo Alto. He believes they produced hundreds of them. After a dozen years living in the Tennyson Street house, the couple moved to the community of Skywood, near Woodside, which is located in the hills just west of Palo Alto and Menlo Park.

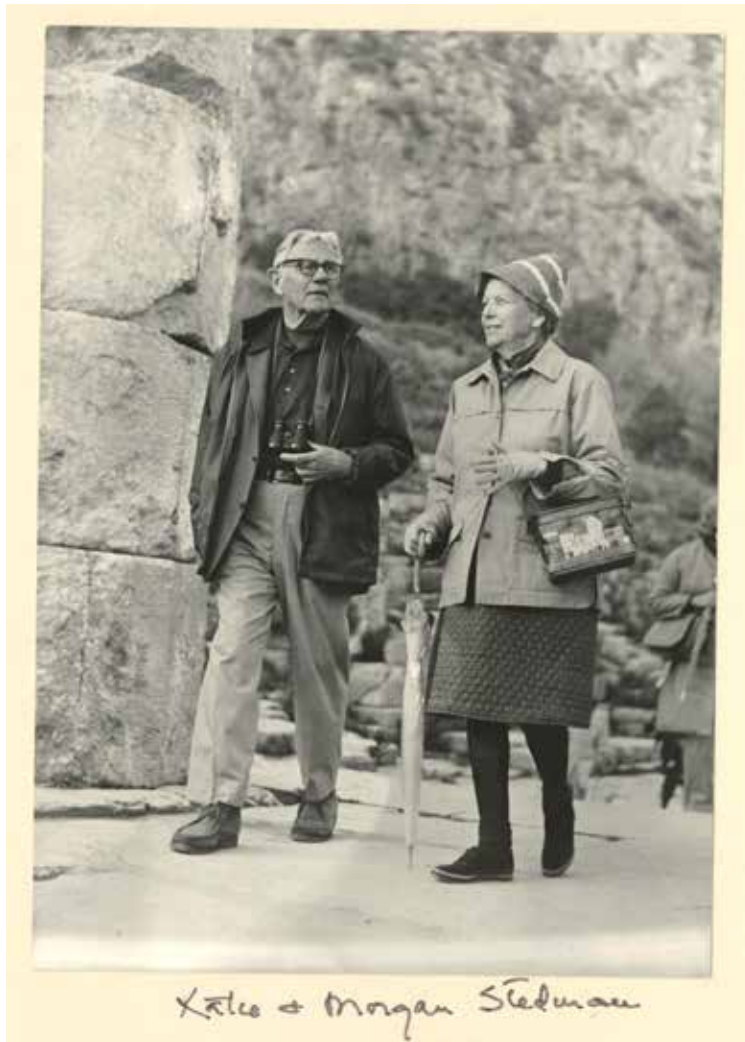
The Eichler Connection (1950-1955): Defining Modern Residential Landscapes

Stedman's career accelerated through her work with Eichler, the developer who revolutionized affordable modern housing in Northern California. In 1950, she designed the landscape for Eichler's personal residence

in Atherton—a project that marked Eichler's first collaboration with architects Anshen and Allen and established the design language that would become synonymous with "Eichler Homes." Eichler and his architects solved the difficult task of combining modernism with common building materials and methods. A standardized plan might have as many as eighteen variations, offering style and value. Eichler was the quintessential modernist suburban home builder in Northern California during this time.

For the Eichler residence, Stedman expanded the building's modernist geometry across the landscape. The original blueprint and color rendering show patio paving that echoes the parallelogram and triangular forms of the house. Her design included distinctive wooden screens, brick-bordered planting

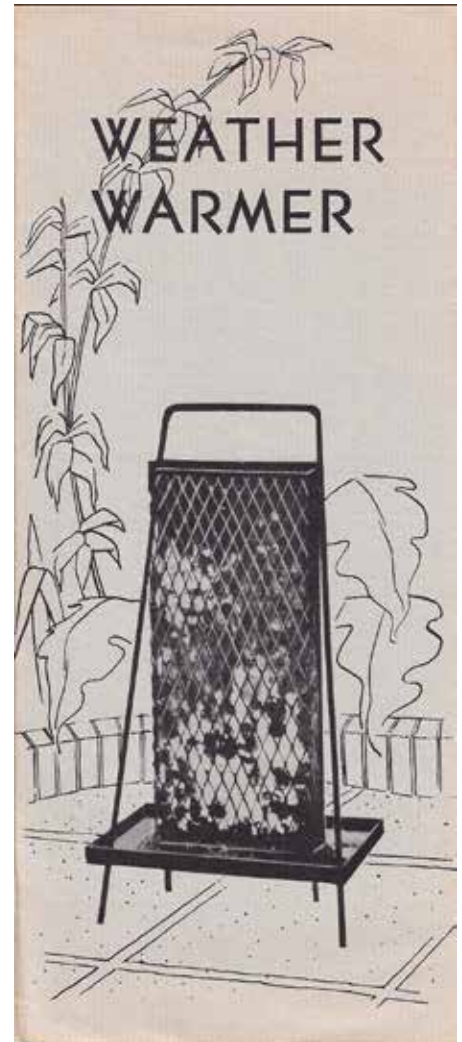
Above: Kathryn and Morgan at their home at 270 Tennyson in Palo Alto. A trio of their plastic panels is visible to the left, and a screen of plastic panels is on the right.



Above, left: Katie and Morgan Stedman in Europe. No date.

Above, right: Cover of the brochure for the Weather Warmer. The steel *Weather Warmer* was created and marketed by Kathryn and Morgan Stedman. Standing 30" high and 18" wide, it could hold a 10-pound bag of briquets and provide warmth for five hours.

Opposite: Plastic panel created by Kathryn and Morgan Stedman. The 12" x 12" panel was laminated with a technique created by the Stedmans and could feature plants or fabrics.



beds, and a trapezoidal swimming pool that complemented the angular architecture.

Between 1950 and 1955, Stedman prepared landscape plans for numerous Eichler developments. Notably, her name often appeared in Eichler newspaper advertisements, sometimes even when the architects' names were omitted. According to Stedman's notes, her responsibilities included site planning to preserve existing trees, designing model home landscapes with fences and walkways, and planting plans.^(d) Buyers could commission her separately for customized yard designs.

In 1954, Stedman collaborated with Matt Kahn, assistant professor of art at Stanford, on an ambitious project called "Art About the House." They transformed an unsold Eichler home in Palo Alto, designed by A. Quincy Jones, into an art exhibition space that demonstrated how modern art could integrate with modern architecture and landscape. Several artists were invited to provide artwork, such as sculpture, woven items, ceramics,

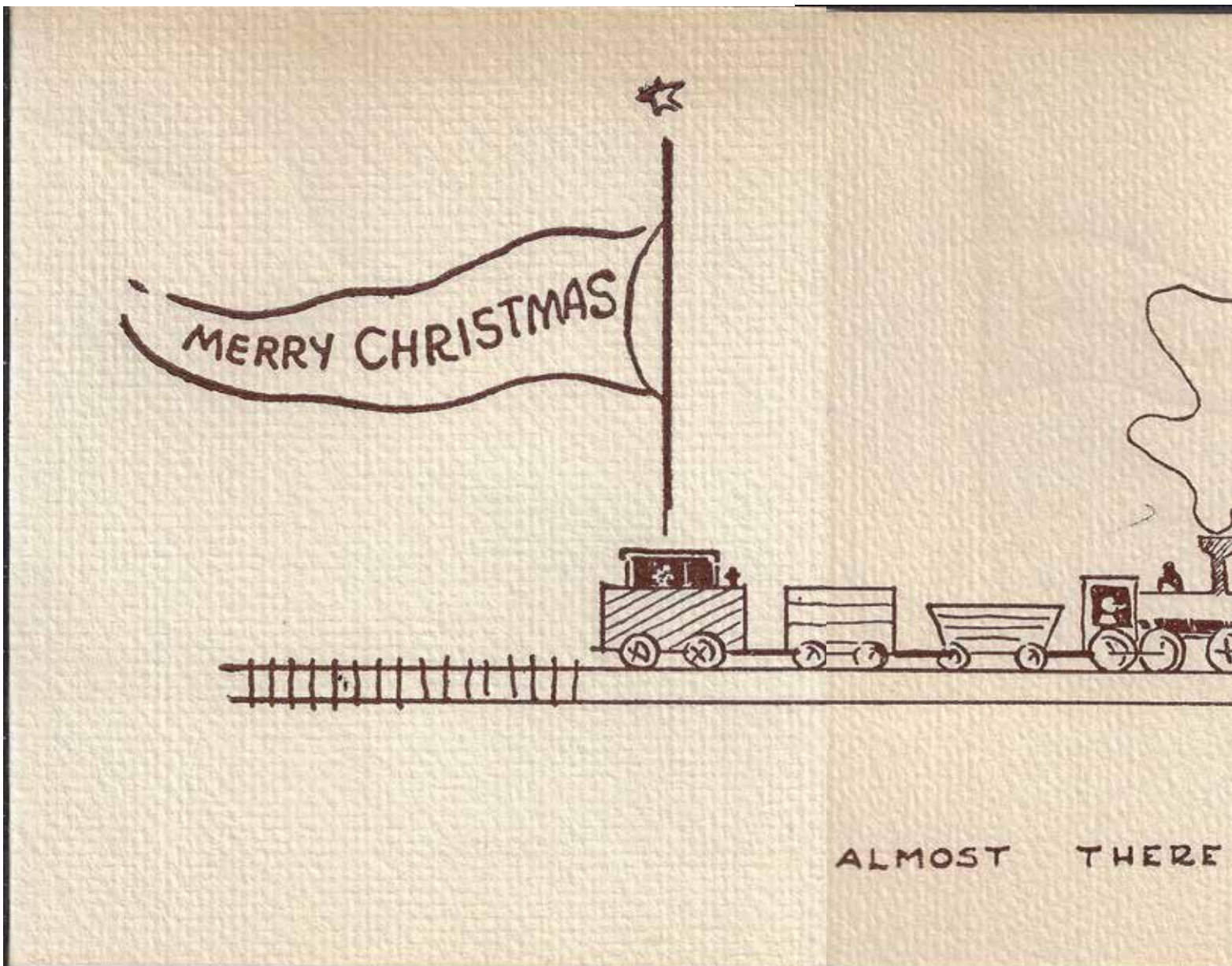
and paintings. Stanford's Art Museum loaned items from its permanent collection.

Stedman's contributions included the design for a six-sided pool, "tree jewelry" (wire and glass mobiles hung from branches), sculptural elements wound around tree trunks, the fence design, and ceramic collars for patio tree openings. The project received national attention, including coverage in *Life* magazine. The house, including the interior and exterior design, continued to be published as late as 1956, when it was featured in *Architect and Engineer*.

Academic and Professional Recognition (1955-1966): National Exposure

The year 1955 brought a new avenue for Stedman's creative energy when she participated in an initiative that brought local designers to the art program at Stanford University. At this time, the department was undergoing exciting changes under the leadership of Ray Nelson Faulkner, an educator who had studied landscape architecture at





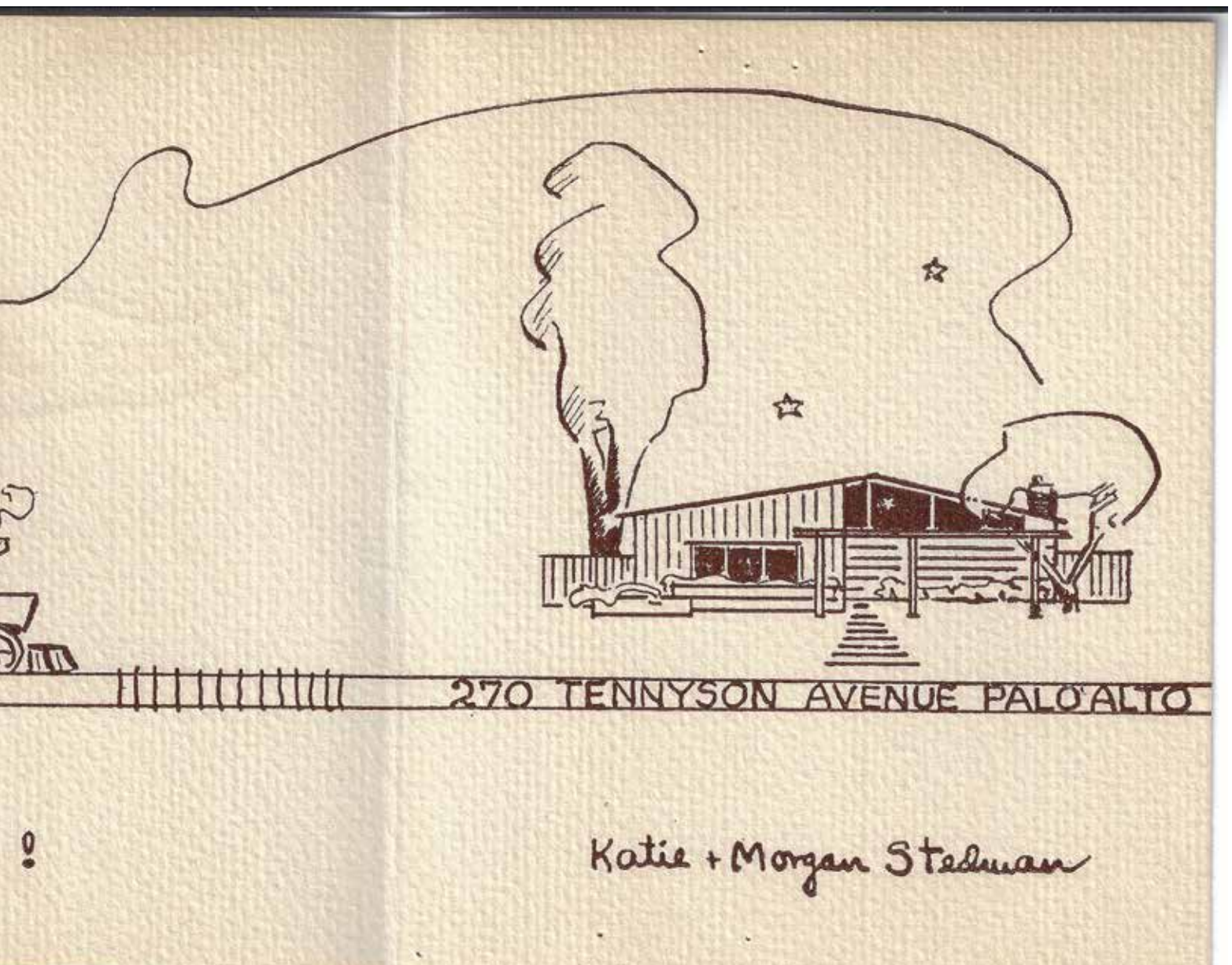
Above: This holiday card appears to have been a collaboration between Kathryn and Morgan and must have been created early in their relationship when they moved to the home Morgan designed in Palo Alto.

Harvard. Faulkner started the Committee for Art at Stanford and directed the art gallery and Stanford Art Museum (now the Cantor Arts Center). He fostered an expansive environment and brought in Professor Victor King Thompson to teach architecture in Stanford's art department. There was a great deal of cross-fertilization within the department, particularly with the art classes of Kahn.

It is unclear how these interactions were structured; they may have consisted of occasional lectures or short courses. Stedman's students displayed models for a cultural center study in 1957, suggesting her involvement could be lengthier than a lecture.⁽⁶⁾ Stedman reported that she was teaching at Stanford as early as 1955, but her name does not appear among instructors in the art and architecture program until 1966. She reportedly had a freewheeling instruction style and enjoyed

teaching and interacting with students.⁽⁷⁾ Stedman's experience as a student under Schaeffer and Albers influenced her own approach to teaching, as well as the Bay Area milieu that encouraged rethinking all aspects of design.

A home and landscape remodel by both Stedmans was selected as the *House Beautiful* 1956 "Pace Setter House." This was a significant recognition during that year's nationwide *Operation Home Improvement* campaign – "...a great nation-wide, year-long drive on the part of government and industry, home-builders and homemakers to better the homes of America."⁽⁸⁾ The project was a remodel of a home on a large lot in Saratoga in Santa Clara County. The annual Pace Setter choice was an important bellwether of taste at the time. Interestingly, 1956 was also the year the magazine editor chose not to feature a completely modern



design, as had been the case in recent Pace Setter awards. Judging from the available examples of their work, neither Morgan nor Kathryn were standard bearers for modernism, or any other style.

As was usual for a Pace Setter issue, the entire magazine was devoted to the home. The Pace Setter project was also featured in the 1958 book *House Beautiful Treasury of Contemporary American Homes*. Although Kathryn's landscape contribution to the Pace Setter house was relatively modest, focused primarily on entry patio revisions and a new play area, the extensive magazine coverage boosted the Stedmans' professional visibility.

Design Evolution and Public Projects (1957-1965): Expanding Influence

In 1957, Stedman was hired to join forces with the landscape architects Allan H. Reid

and Herbert J. Kopp on the design of three Palo Alto parks in 1956 – Henry W. Seale Park (then known as Stockton Park), Hoover Park, and Don de Jesus Ramos Park (then known as Meadow Park). Stedman's role is not known. Although each of the four-acre parks has been modified over the years, some features consistent with the era remain; primarily large areas of lawn, mature trees, and the use of concrete blocks and breeze blocks as dividers, walls and bench supports.

Stedman's plant knowledge was so respected that Sunset Publishing commissioned her to write the introduction to their 1965 book *Sunset Ideas for Garden Color*. Her seventeen-page essay on color theory and garden design demonstrates her ability to communicate complex principles in accessible language, and remains useful today. Early in her career, Stedman employed bold

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Everything you want in your new home is here! The newest designs of the famous architectural team of A. Quincy Jones and Frederick C. Emmons; the construction skill and experience of America's most honored builder. Every Garland Park Home has dozens of "custom" features including: engineered radiant heating, cork floors, built-in combination clothes washer and dryer, dishwasher, garbage disposer, built-in electric oven and range, Philippine mahogany wall paneling, 2-car garage. All this, plus Palo Alto's sunny, fog-free climate! See you this week-end!

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SPECIAL LANDSCAPING SERVICE! Individual landscaping plan, showing details of construction and concrete areas—PLUS consultation with famed landscape architect Kathryn Imlay Stedman and staff available to Garland Park home owners for only \$30. Ask Eichler Homes Representative for details.



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VISIT GARLAND PARK TODAY: From San Francisco, drive south on Bayshore Highway to Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto. Turn right and follow Embarcadero to California Ave. Turn left on California and watch for signs. From El Camino, turn east on Embarcadero to Louis Road. Turn right on Louis Road and watch for signs.

Above: The advertisement for an Eichler tract of homes opening in Garland Park, Palo Alto, lists "Landscaping by Kathryn Imlay Stedman" as part of its sales pitch. From the *San Francisco Examiner*, March 12, 1955.

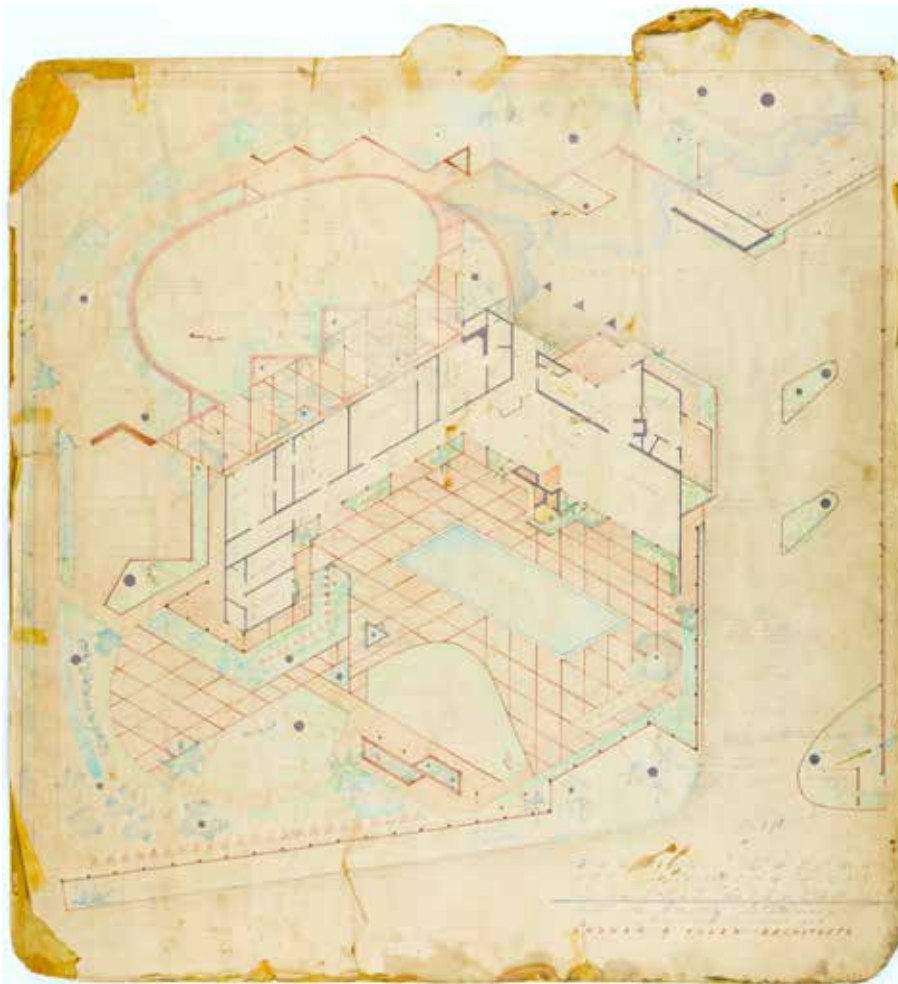
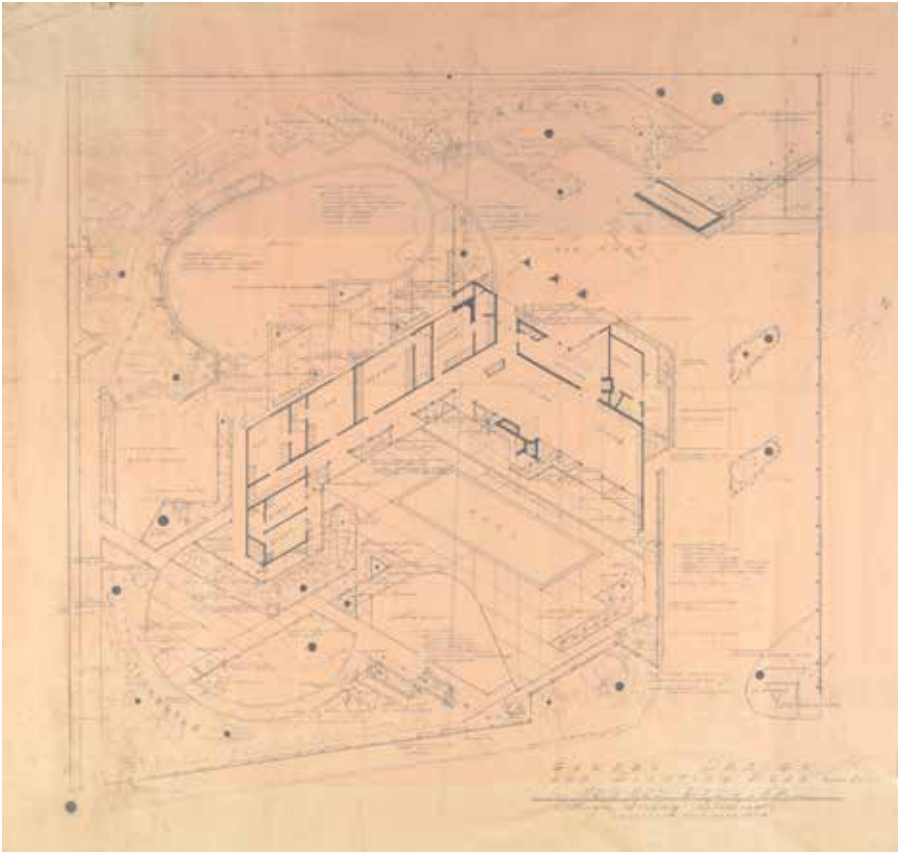
geometric forms and experimented with innovative materials. As her reputation grew and client base expanded, her design repertoire evolved. Kathryn and Morgan developed a deep appreciation for Japanese design principles, leading them to incorporate more naturalistic elements that harmonized with the surrounding landscape and they applied these ideas to projects in the Los Alto Hills.

The second Stedman planting plan that recently came to light is titled *Planting Plan for Mr. and Mrs. Howard Frame, Los Altos*. The undated colored drawing for a six-acre estate demonstrates Kathryn's confident approach to large-scale projects, with curvilinear forms that elegantly echo the rolling hillsides visible from the site. Parts of the property and landscape, including mature landscape trees, were already in existence and Stedman was likely brought into the project during a home remodel. The pool and attendant patio may have been added at this time. Stedman created several different garden experiences and numerous planting beds. The property was sold in the mid-1960s and subdivided in 1966. Regrettably,

the Frame house and landscape were demolished several years later.

Other examples of Stedman's work include a home and landscape for Martin and Barbara Packard in the Los Altos Hills, and another for Lois Crozier Hogle. Although the Packard home has been designated a local landmark, in part due to Morgan's design for the house, little is known about Kathryn's landscape. For the Hogle project, Kathryn designed a naturalistic pool in a free-form shape and used natural boulders for retaining walls, while Morgan designed a Japanese-style tearoom near the pool. Photographs from the North collection and from *Sunset* magazine suggest a light hand on the landscape that flows into the surrounding oak woodlands. The tearoom persists, but the pool was later removed.

Stedman's swimming pool designs exemplify her versatility. For modernist properties like the Eichler residence, she created angular forms that extended the architectural geometry into the landscape. For more naturalistic settings, as in the Hogle property, she designed free-form pools with irregular stone edges that settled



This page: Garden Design and Planting Plan for Mr. & Mrs. Eichler. The second image is a colored rendering of the blueprint. Courtesy of the Environmental Design Archives, College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley.

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ART **about the house**

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MODERN DRAWINGS

- Contemporary expressions of fine and useful arts, inside and outside the house, inspired by and displayed in an outstanding Eichler Home in Walnut Grove, Palo Alto.
- Art forms by seven exhibitors under the direction of Kathryn Imlay Stedman, landscape architect, and Matt Kahn, designer, of the Stanford faculty.

SPONSORED BY **EICHLER HOMES** PALO ALTO

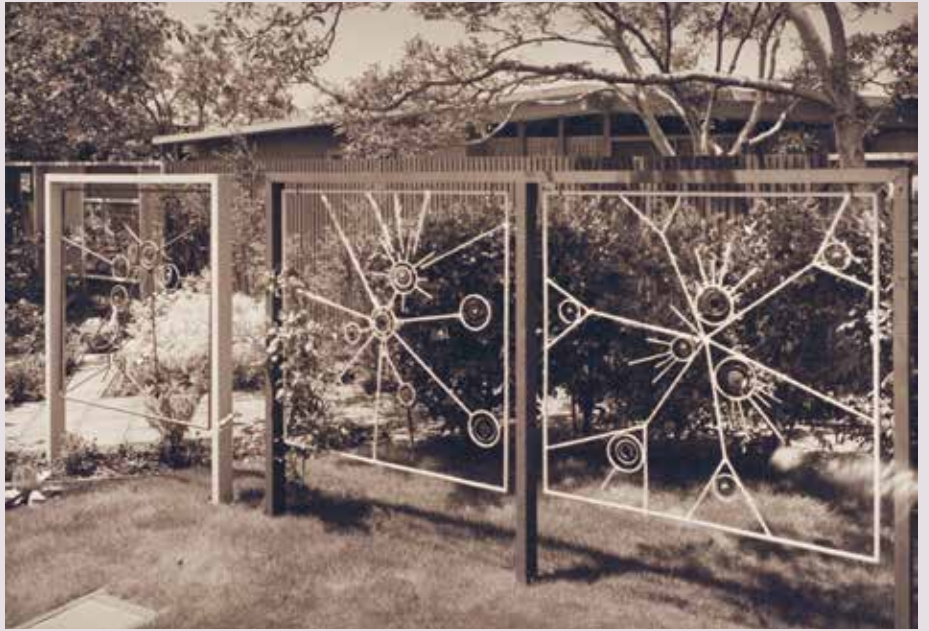
- From El Camino Real turn east on Charleston (at Rickey's Studio Inn). Follow signs to Walnut Grove. Open daily 11:00 to dark. Admission is free.

From the *San Francisco Examiner*, May 22, 1954.

The “Art About the House” exhibit in 1954

was staged in an Eichler home designed by A. Quincy Jones. Various fence, screening, and decorative elements were created and displayed by Stedman. The six-sided pool was a creative solution to fully utilize the space in the back corner of the garden. Her flair for fence design was on full display behind the pool. Ernest Braun, photographer. Courtesy Palo Alto Historical Association.







This spread: The *House Beautiful* Pace Setter House of 1956 was awarded to Morgan Stedman. Kathryn prepared the landscape plans and may have had greater involvement. Among contributions were a new front entry landscape, a play area, and a “lanai.” As noted in *House Beautiful*, *An entirely new garden was created at the entrance court in the remodeling of the house. It meant making the house more garden-like at this point and the new, modern garden virtually a roofless room of the house, Now the Pace Setter has two gardens for various uses.* Maynard L. Parker, photographer. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



easily into the surrounding oak woodlands.

Stedman actively promoted her ideas through press releases, resulting in newspaper features about her innovative fences, garden furniture, planting schemes, and decorative elements. Several Stedman projects were featured in *Sunset* and in the magazine’s design books.

Environmental Advocacy (1962-1982): Protecting the Landscape

By the 1960s, the Stedmans had become concerned about rapid development threatening the hills west of Palo Alto. In 1962, they joined Wallace Stegner and twenty-four other residents to form the Committee for Green Foothills. This group advocated for regional land planning that would protect ecologically sensitive areas from poorly conceived development projects.

Kathryn published a booklet for the Committee in 1966 titled *Skyline Landscape: A Look at Environmental Quality*. Colleagues on the Committee described her as “quiet but articulate, with a deep knowledge about land and environmentalism.”^(h) The Committee’s pioneering land preservation efforts inspired similar movements throughout the Bay Area. In 1982, the organization dedicated a publication called *20-20 Vision: In Celebration of the Peninsula Hills* to Kathryn and Morgan Stedman.

Later Years and Legacy (1978-1997): Urban Forestry Champion

After Morgan’s death in 1978, Kathryn moved back to the heart of Palo Alto. She had always been dedicated to the subject of

trees, spearheading the first edition of *Trees of Palo Alto* in 1959 and initiating efforts to map and protect the city’s landmark trees. At age eighty-one, she devoted her efforts to urban forestry, chairing Palo Alto’s tree protection program and organizing a *Celebration of Trees* event. In recognition of her contributions, the City of Palo Alto planted a group of Chinese tallow trees (*Triadica sebifera*, previously known as *Sapium sebiferum*) outside the Rinconada Library in 1992. Kathryn was living across the street from the library at this time and could see the tallow trees from her front window.

Inspired by this tribute, Stedman wrote a poem that captured her continuing connection to the landscape:

My patio tree
 Sapium sebiferum
 Was multiplied by six
 Planted by the City of Palo Alto
 To embrace the corner
 Of the Main Library,
 With a Heart at 92
 I await the inner reds
 Of heart shaped leaves.

Kathryn Imlay Stedman died in 1997 at age ninety-seven. She is buried in Glens Falls, New York, among her family. Her legacy lives on in her design work, the environmental causes she championed, and the trees she protected—a fitting memorial for a woman who dedicated her life to enhancing the relationship between people and their natural surroundings.



PHOTO BY BRADY

House Beautiful's
PACE SETTER HOUSE for 1956

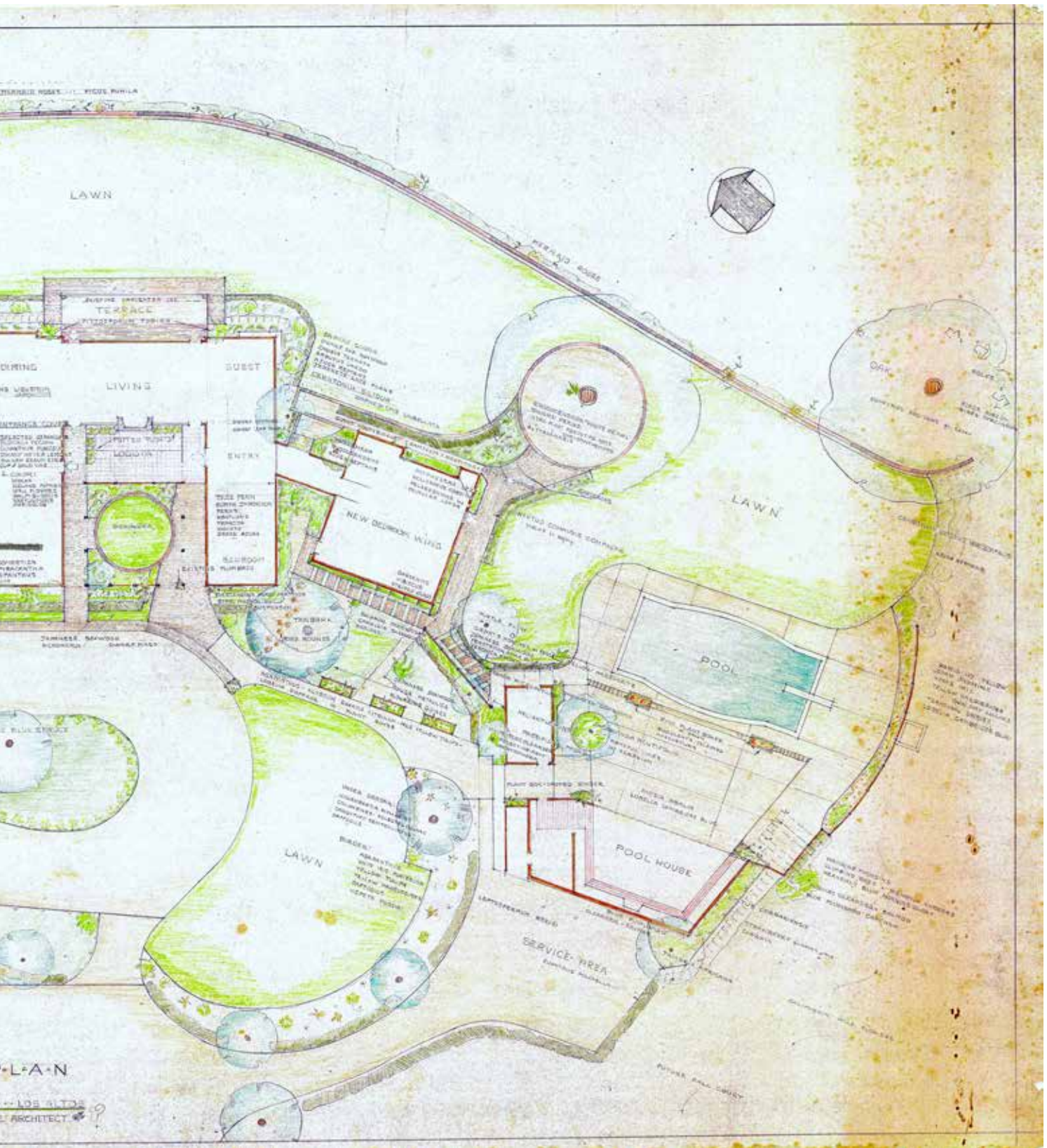
showing that remodeling is often the best way
to achieve the finest living





From the information I've gathered, it's clear that Stedman was a versatile landscape architect who was constantly engaged in design and in her community. Between the time exploring her work and talking with her nephew, I've developed an impression of her as having a warm and

generous nature and a fire to create - from clothing designs, drawings and paintings to architectural pieces and landscape designs. As more of her work comes to light, we'll gain a fuller appreciation of her personality, design skills, and the extent of her achievements.



Above: *Planting Plan for Mrs. Howard Frame* by Kathryn Stedman, late 1950s. This large estate shows a very different design sensibility from the Eichler projects. The 34-1/2" x 62" drawing is used with the permission of the Davis Doyle Mize family.



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- a. Weinstein, Dave. "Joe Loved Women for Strength and Grace." *Eichler Network*. [Online] Aug. 9, 2018.
- b. Schaeffer, Rudolph. *The Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design: Art in SF Since 1915*. Interview. Margaretta Mitchell. Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.
- c. Scott, Geraldine Knight. *Geraldine Knight Scott: A Woman in Landscape Architecture in California 1926-1989*. Interview. Jack Buktenica. Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1990, 1976.
- d. Doyle, Michael. *A Landscape Architect Who Wants to Paint the Town Red*. Newspaper clipping from Kathryn Stedman's papers. n.d.
- e. "Models on Display." *The Peninsula Times Tribune*. June 11, 1957.
- f. North, D. Warner. Interview. Janet Gracyk. May 1, 2024.
- g. Barry, Joseph. "Remodeling in California." *The House Beautiful Treasury of Contemporary American Homes*. New York: Hearst Corporation, 1958.
- h. Roberts, Lennie. Interview. Portola Valley, Oct. 20, 2020.



Opposite: This promotional photograph features Kathryn's naturalistic pool and Morgan's Japanese-style tea room. For this Los Alto Hills landscape, for Lois Crozier Hogle, Kathryn used a light hand, understanding that the surrounding oak woodlands were paramount. (Kathryn wrote on the back of the photo that *Sunset* took the photo for their magazine and hired models.) Undated, no photo credit.

Left: Kathryn Stedman. No date.

Endnotes

1 Weinstein, Dave. Joe Loved Women for Strength and Grace. Eichler Network. [Online] Aug. 9, 2018.

2 Schaeffer, Rudolph. *The Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design: Art in SF Since 1915*. Interview. Margaretta Mitchell. s.l. : Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1981.

3 Scott, Geraldine Knight. Geraldine Knight Scott: A Woman in Landscape Architecture in California 1926-1989. Interview. Jack Buktenica. s.l. : Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1990, 1976.

4 The 1946 show at the SF Museum of Art was the second such exploration of contemporary landscape architecture. The first was the 1937 "Contemporary Landscape Architecture and its Sources" exhibition, a milestone event in the history of landscape architecture. Steven Keylon's comprehensive article on the 1937

5 Henry Morgan Stedman (1905-1978) preferred going by the name Morgan Stedman. Some documents claim he was a nephew of the architect Julia Morgan. In correspondence with D. Warner North, I learned that Stedman and Julia Morgan were distant cousins.

6 Doyle, Michael. A Landscape Architect *Who Wants to Paint the Town Red*. Newspaper clipping from Kathryn Stedman's papers. n.d.

7 "Models on Display." *The Peninsula Times Tribune*. June 11, 1957.

8 North, D. Warner. Interview. Janet Gracyk. May 1, 2024.

9 Barry, Joseph. "Remodeling in California." *The House Beautiful Treasury of Contemporary American Homes*. New York : Hearst Corporation, 1958.

10 That same year, Royston, Eckbo and Williams, who previously designed Mitchell Park for the city, were tapped for another (unnamed) neighborhood park and the redesign of Rinconada Park. (Helen Norman Proctor was also named as a contributor, but her role was not described.)

11 Stedman's introduction may be viewed online at the Open Library, Internet Archive.

12 Deborah Hedrick, who provided Stedman's landscape plan, was a child when her family lived at the property; this landscape was in place. In conversation with her, she and I determined that Stedman's landscape plan was likely prepared in the late 1950s.

13 Roberts, Lennie. Interview. Portola Valley, Oct. 20, 2020.

La La La



The spectacular Laguna Beach coast. Photo by John Martin.

Laguna

Thea Gurns





CGLHS LAGUNA BEACH CONFERENCE

October 25-27, 2024

Art and Activism Preserves a Coastal Landscape

Back in the early 1970s, Laguna was the post-college home for my husband and myself for nearly half a dozen years. We lived on Solana Way, a street above Coast Highway and Victoria Beach. At Ford's Café—now Diz's—Wednesday bargain spaghetti dinners drew us in as regulars. The conference hotel we knew through its restaurant, high-end Ben Brown's Steak House; the prices were off-limits for us. Years later for family reunions we came to the hotel as the ramshackle Aliso Creek Inn. Evenings were quiet with the rustle of racoon families rummaging trash cans, frogs croaking in the damp air, the hoot of owls and cooing of doves. By the time CGLHS gathered on the premises, the hotel had morphed into The Ranch, with upgraded restaurant and rooms. Now the racket comes from wedding parties' happy chatter and music. The surroundings remain much the same, although planting is denser and more succulent-heavy.

We were in Laguna for the first stirrings of preservation activism. Remembered by few now, we participated in a Christmas day march with police escort down blocked-off Laguna Canyon Road. The protest was against a planned tract of homes. A rock concert at the march's end was promised;

cold forced our early retreat.

At the Laguna Beach co-op market we were recruited by local landscape architect Ann Christoph as volunteer recorders of landscape specifics, a task simple enough for the untutored. We turned down the invitation in favor of finding jobs.

The Laguna Beach Art Museum exhibition of plein-air art, we attended. To us it was another in the offering lineup, solely special by its worth. During the CGLHS conference, we learned that the showing was the first of its kind.

James Dilly's bookstore was a favorite and frequented shop. Professors Gordon Marsh and Pete Fielding taught at our alma mater, UC Irvine. At Laguna Beach Answering Service I picked up the phone when the Lang and Wood secretary was absent. My husband John Blocker worked for the Irvine Company.

Saturday presentations at the Annual Conference of the California Garden and Landscape History Society filled out what we knew and triggered more remembrance. Just how special Laguna Beach is we learned in deeper ways. Early-comers down to present-day residents, we perceived, also appreciated what gave the town and surroundings its special character.



This spread: A foggy Saturday morning for check-in and breakfast at the Ranch at Laguna Beach. Photographs by John Martin, Jesse Lattig, and Steven Keylon.



Top: Conference convener and landscape architect Ann Christoph.

Middle: Bob Borthwick, a landscape architect, has been involved in the Laguna Beach Open Space and landscape issues for over 50 years, having worked on projects like the preservation of Aliso Creek, Laguna Beach parks, and the restoration of Laguna Canyon Creek.

Bottom: Tom Lamb is an abstract aerial photographer known for his environmental advocacy and memorable photographs. Photographs by Jesse Lattig and John Martin.

SATURDAY

On conference weekend, even as CGLHS members gained clarity into what made Laguna Beach's character unique, we found ourselves befogged in Aliso Canyon. Fog treated us to variations: wisping and curling around people and objects as we took breakfast outside on the deck; in the afternoon lifting over the ocean but keeping a presence; and at night strengthening into a heavy, muffling overlay as we walked to our rooms.

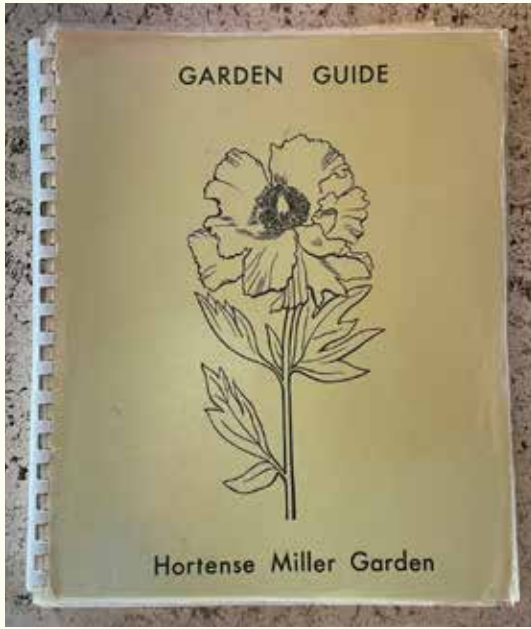
During the morning, from presenters most knowledgeable to convey its essence, we absorbed a sense of place. The coterie of committed locals knew whereof they spoke through active engagement. The "Speakers" handout described extensive backgrounds.

Bob Borthwick Involved since the 1970s on Laguna Beach landscape, preservation and open space issues, the landscape architect led beautification and conservancy organizations and worked on city task forces regarding flood control and view preservation. He was involved with the Laguna Greenbelt project.

Ann Christoph For fifty years, the landscape architect and community organizer worked on parks and public open spaces. The former council member and mayor continues to serve on civic boards shaping Laguna Beach and writes a column for the *Laguna Beach Independent* focused on environment and planning issues.

Eric Jessen Retired from government as Chief of Planning, Acquisition and Development of Orange County Regional Harbors, Beaches and Parks District, Jessen directs his attention to local history and art detection with a concentration on Laguna Beach, the Irvine Ranch, and the Irvine family. University training in physical geography and biogeography allows him to pinpoint "spots on the ground" where plein-air painters stood to create their art. His ability contributed valuable input to the Laguna Greenbelt's Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) submittal.

Tom Lamb The abstract aerial photographer creates photographs and champions environmental awareness. He was in on the creation and drafting of the original HALS legislation. As a board member of Laguna Wilderness Press, he worked with others to design the Laguna HALS book and produced considerable architectural photography featured in its pages.



This page: Conference attendees explore the terraced pathways and native plant collections of the Hortense Miller Garden, perched on the bluffs overlooking Laguna Beach. The 2.5-acre botanical sanctuary, known for its drought-tolerant Mediterranean and California native species, provided a tranquil retreat for networking and reflection during the event. Photographs by Jesse Lattig, John Martin, Libby Simon, and Steven Keylon.



Above: Conference attendees gather for dinner at Diz's As Is Restaurant, enjoying the restaurant's intimate atmosphere and coastal cuisine in the heart of Laguna Beach. Photograph by Jesse Lattig.

Opposite, top and middle: Ann Christoph shares the rich history of South Laguna Community Garden Park with conference attendees, highlighting the community-driven transformation of this beloved local green space. Photos by John Martin and Steven Keylon.

Opposite, bottom: The conference concluded with a walking tour which included several private gardens in South Laguna. Photographs by John Martin and Jesse Lattig.

After breakfast and easy check-in on the conference room's deck, we trooped inside and received a short and hearty welcome from CGLHS President Keith Park.

Delivery was brisk and cheerful as speakers dove right into their topics.

First up was the geology and topology of the region with its breccia, sandstone and other rocks forming creek beds, canyon folds, and ocean coves. Throughout indigenous times, Paleo Indians followed by Tongva people inhabited the area and knew how to live off the land.

Luck of steep and rocky land formation kept Laguna safe from early development. Unique on the Orange County coast, Laguna Beach had neither mission nor rancho designation. For missionaries, travel was easier on a road jutting eastward from Mission San Juan Capistrano. Rancheros found rugged landscape disallowed grazing or easy farming.

Although geography isolated and allowed larger open space left alone for preservation, small farms occupied arable land in more recent times. Joe Thurston arrived as a homesteader in 1871 and his Thurston Ranch and others like it endowed Laguna with much of its character. Small homestead plots governed town development and turned over time into a warren of neighborhoods, requiring navigation through twisty streets lined with Laguna's signature eucalyptus trees. A small, shared town center fostered encounters that built

a sense of community. Community led to a communal sense of the setting's worth.

Artists, the group that arrived next, were primarily of the plein-air school and ready to record Laguna Beach's picturesque hills, canyons, creeks, rock formations, beaches and coves. They joined residents in recognizing the area's unique beauty.

A hundred years later, scholars, saviors, and savants of hippie Laguna Beach showed up. Dilly, the local bookseller, returned from a tour of England impressed with the greenbelt concept. He persuaded others that preservation of the open landscape surrounding the village was crucial to uphold and protect their sanctuary. Committees met on state, county, and local levels. Environmental impact reports were submitted, records searched, letters written, presentations given, petitions signed, and marches marched. Eventually, citizen agitation allied with savvy activism of enlightened Laguna citizens resulted in bond passage to acquire open space in Laguna and Aliso Canyons that make up the Laguna Greenbelt. That preservation ensures Laguna stays exceptional on the Southern California coast.

CGLHS taught me about the Historic American Landscape Survey (HALS) national program. We heard the story of Laguna's application through personal narrative, a first-hand oral history of local activism. **Laguna Beach and the Greenbelt**, the citizens-shepherded book, outlines what,



why, and how the greenbelt is precious and safeguards Laguna's surrounding coastal sage scrub and southern maritime chaparral, its slopes, canyons, creeks and beaches.

Thus armed with knowledge from morning lectures, in the afternoon we had insight to appreciate sites selected for our viewing.

Seaview Park's elevation 900 feet above sea level gave an enlightening perspective and revealed that Laguna is more than the meeting of land and ocean, although that meeting is spectacular. In an elfin forest, we overlooked creek, lagoon, and coastline, also homes, highway and village. Here along the top rock rib of a slope packed with mature native plants—California sagebrush, black sage, buckwheat, toyon, yarrow, coast sunflower, dudleya, artemisia, prickly pear, lemonade berry, manzanita, ceanothus and blue-eyed grass, their fragrances mingling—we walked a snaking path among the rocks and boulders. In this natural setting, we found a bench and table on which to eat lunch and debate from which direction periodic “booms” blasted our peace; the detonations turned out to be arms practice from miles-away Camp Pendleton.

Next we traveled downhill and into residential environs. The Smith house garden tour featured suburban Laguna: Herb Brownell, architect; Fred Lang, landscape architect. The garden gave us our *Sunset* magazine expression of the mid-century



This spread: The conference concluded with a walking tour which included several private gardens in South Laguna. Photographs by John Martin and Jesse Lattig.



modern moment. Here were succulents, aloes, and jade plants aplenty, a forward-leaning planting in its time and characteristic of Lang. Pebbly concrete constructed in grids delineated by thin redwood spacers is another of his design signatures.

In Treasure Island Park, more populated than Seaview, we meandered another lengthy, winding path, this one stretched along ocean-level frontage in a design worthy of the upscale hotel Montage. A bright sunshine—fog held in abeyance out at sea—displayed lawn, succulents and green hedges in style with numerous viewpoints from which to admire coves, crashing surf, and a sweep of ocean. We owe the Coastal Commission for designated public access, backed by citizen activists.

Hanging atop a hillside, the Hortense Miller House and Garden (*Eden* Winter 2008) presented a more bohemian mid-century modern moment. I was fortunate to meet the lady herself and hear how Fred Lang popped by now and then, plant pots in hand for try-out in her garden mix among native coastal scrub, tropical succulents, blooming

perennials and exotics such as towering puya stalks from Chile. Wildflowers emerge as an annual feature. Embedded in the planting are hundreds of steps to access different levels of the terrain. The garden's individuality lies in these levels, providing steep gradients and overlook into vertical gulleys dropping to the valley below. Bright painted murals by Miller add a colorful, playful touch.

SUNDAY

Even at an early hour, South Laguna Community Garden Park was alive with hustle-bustle softened in atmospheric mist. In the cool of morning, gardeners were out tending their parcels, watering, weeding, flower-cutting. The organic garden is terraced on three levels. We clustered on the lowest to hear the garden's history and its procedures; then we were released, free to walk around viewing plots varying from veggies, to florals, to both intermingled. Garden art ranged from weathered metal flowers, to buddha figures, to other vernacular art. What looked to be a friendly ceramic ogre squatted in the center of the lowest terrace, a

mounded heap wearing tiny succulents and squinting at us with big blue eyes.

Opportunity to explore South Laguna offered history most present in old-time charm and relatable by its human scale. Fred Lang's house and studio were here, and his work has much to do with preserving a village sense. The walking tour led the group uphill on narrow streets overhung with branches from tall trees. Small lots and older houses gave a hamlet feel, not like larger Laguna to the north or west of Coast Highway sporting newer, looming domestic architecture. The Village Green has the feel of a neighborhood park with three wrought-iron gates leading to a playground, picnic table, and lawn with trees.

When we left Laguna in the 70s, Heisler Park required renewal. Now a self-guided tour enhanced by commentary from Ann Christoph and Bob Borthwick showed rejuvenated groomed pathways and a viewing park perched cliff-top. A large grassy area gave way to terraced garden areas defined by stonework. The park holds picnic tables, restrooms, and a lawn bowling plot. An iconic cliff-edge gazebo is ever popular for photography. From the green bluff-top, the view is of sand cliffs, rocky coves, incoming waves and open sea. Trails lead to the beach.

As a returnee to Laguna, I was curious about how fresh eyes saw the weekend. I asked pal Nancy Carol Carter for her three take-away impressions. Carter expressed surprise that, despite living in Southern California for thirty years, Laguna Beach and its charms was an eye-opener for her. This stretch of Coast Highway with beaches, coves, overlooks, trails and canyons had failed to receive her due attention, as it had been disregarded for centuries by missionaries, rancheros and early settlers. Further, she found our hotel setting across from Aliso Cove and busy Coast Highway gave literal set back into an earlier era of country Laguna Beach. We speculated that Thurston's famous melons were grown on what is now the nine-hole golf course.

Lastly, Carter was impressed with the Laguna Greenbelt and the jewel it preserves and protects from Southern California's ever-encroaching built environment.

What John and I discovered during our return is how our crucial formative years were also decisive shaping years for Laguna Beach. In the early 70s we did not grasp the significance of activity all around us. The weekend presentations gave enlightening context that intensified our recollections. That Laguna Beach is a region made exceptional by location we earlier understood. How the place came to be shaped is knowledge acquired during the October weekend. The big revelation is how the Laguna Beach



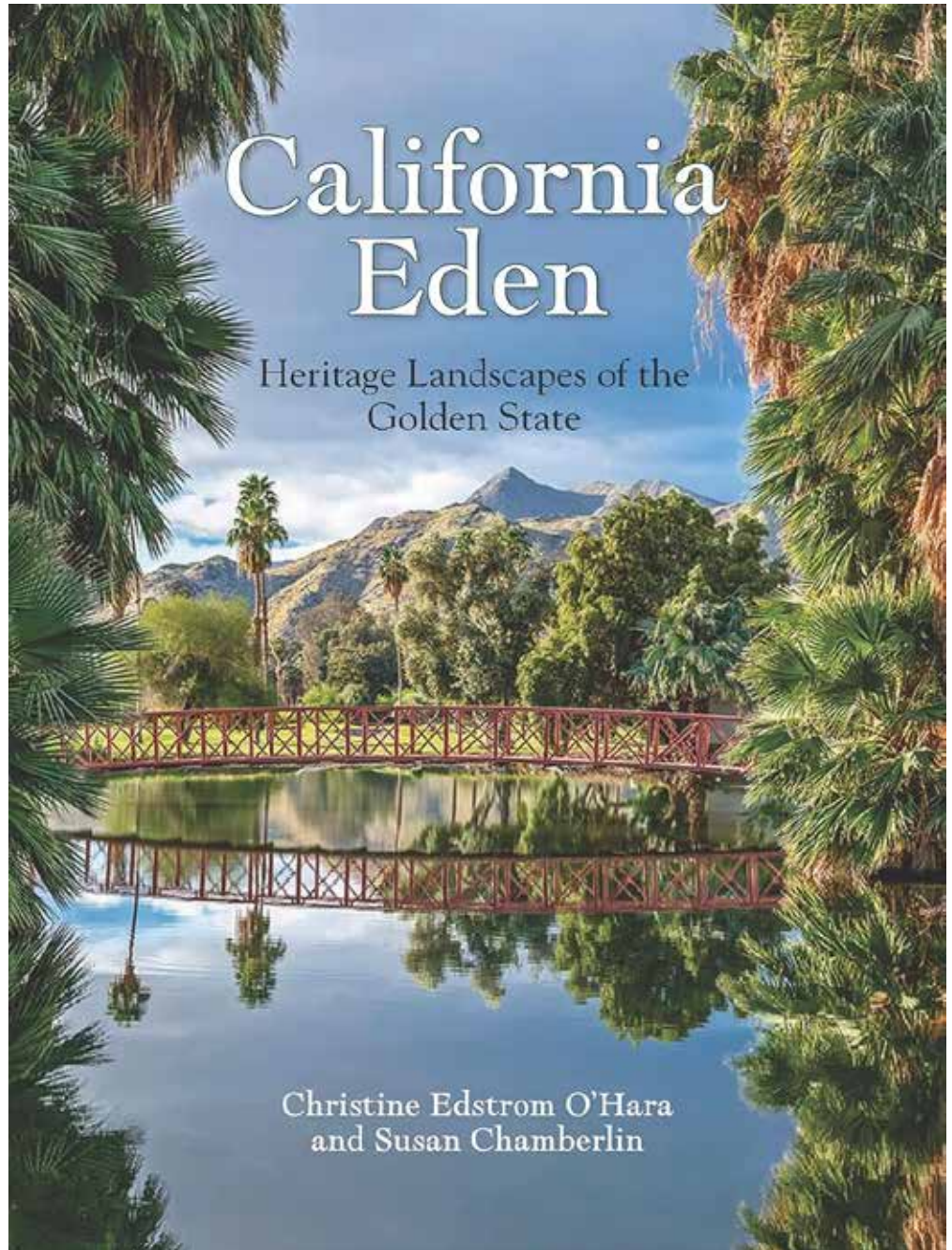
Greenbelt keeps the space special.

Research preceding any CGLHS conference imparts strength and legitimacy to the program. Work for this conference stretched back years—decades—showing through exposition and exhibition the land's history and value. For those who labored through decades to shape the coastal city and landscape as it is today, I offer respect. Because they long ago identified treasure and committed to the long, slogging effort of preservation, we enjoy a timeless natural gem that will endure. The presenters offered accounts of history they themselves had made. There could be no better title for the conference weekend than "Art and Activism Preserves a Coastal Landscape."

Members in the News

Christine Edstrom O'Hara and Susan Chamberlain Award Announcement

California Eden: Heritage Landscapes of the Golden State won two 2025 Silver Laurel Medal Media Awards from Garden Communicators International (GARDENCOMM, formerly known as Garden Writers Association). Christine Edstrom O'Hara and Susan Chamberlain were authors and editors of the book. The award for writing is a tribute to the additional nineteen talented authors who contributed essays. The book also won an award in the publishing category, an honor for Angel City Press at the Los Angeles Public Library. Paddy Calistro and Scott McAuley, the founders of Angel City Press, agreed to publish *California Eden*. They, along with editor Terri Accomazzo and designer J. Eric Lynxwiler of Signpost Graphics, guided the form the book would take. There were also fact-checkers and copy editors. In addition to historic images, photography was provided by Saxon Holt, Marion Brenner, Millicent Harvey, Rachel Cobb, Susan Chamberlain, Joel Michelsen, David A. Laws, and many others. This is a wonderful honor for everyone, including the California Garden & Landscape History Society and the generous donors who helped fund some of the book's costs.



California Eden cover by Millicent Harvey Photography.

CGLHS congratulates Eleanor Cox on her appointment to the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission



Congratulations to Eleanor Cox on San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission Appointment

We are delighted to congratulate our esteemed Vice-President, Eleanor R. Cox, on her recent appointment to the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission. On July 28, 2025, Mayor Daniel Lurie announced Eleanor's selection to this prestigious oversight body, where she will serve as the architectural historian in Seat 3.

Eleanor brings exceptional qualifications to this role, drawing on her extensive experience as a senior preservation specialist at MIG, Inc., where she manages cultural

landscape projects across nationally significant sites including Pinnacles National Park, Pearl Harbor National Memorial, and Yosemite National Park. Her master's degree in historic preservation from Columbia University and her deep expertise in cultural landscape preservation, architectural history, and climate adaptation for historic resources make her an invaluable addition to the commission. As Eleanor noted in her statement to the Board of Supervisors, she takes "a holistic approach to my work that focuses on character, context, and access," bringing a sustainable perspective that balances preservation with sensitive growth and change in San Francisco's evolving urban environment.

While we celebrate this well-deserved recognition of Eleanor's expertise and leadership, we must also acknowledge with regret that she will be stepping down from her role as Vice-President of our board. Eleanor has been instrumental in planning many CGLHS events, including several successful conferences, including the Fall 2025 conference coming up in Palo Alto. While her departure is bittersweet, we know she will continue to champion the causes we hold dear in her new capacity. We wish Eleanor every success as she takes on this important civic responsibility and thank her for her dedicated service to the California Garden & Landscape History Society.



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HISTORY SOCIETY

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Front Cover: In the early 1970s, landscape architects Royston, Hanamoto, Beck, and Abey added an element to an existing multi-faceted playground they had designed earlier. This was a newer urban park sited over a subterranean parking garage in San Francisco's historic Portsmouth Square. The playground's feature was a custom-designed series of six wooden tree houses, one with a steep slide. This was augmented by a geodesic climbing dome, tunnels, bridges, swings, and a kid-powered merry-go-round. Courtesy RHAA.

Back cover: The 1956 *House Beautiful* Pace Setter House was a collaboration between landscape architect Kathryn Imlay Stedman and her husband, architect Henry Morgan Stedman. Maynard L. Parker, photographer. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.