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Landscape Architect Walter Hood Aims to Build Community-Inclusive Spaces

By Dan Macsai

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This Land is Your Land

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The daffodils sprouting from raised beds, the bikers speeding down smoothly paved pathways, the metal bollards lining the promenade along Oakland's shimmering Lake Merritt -- all of it just pisses Walter Hood off. "Everything seems like it's dropped out of nowhere," the landscape designer says, pointing out the offenses. The newly renovated lakefront looks pleasant, much in the way most American public spaces -- downtown plazas, suburban libraries, neighborhood playgrounds -- look pleasant. "It's like, okay, we'll put in the grasses and the rocks and let's do the stupid green roof over a garbage-compactor thing," he continues. "That's the playbook of landscape architecture. But this is the centerpiece of our community. It should add up and become something larger."

Hood, obviously, did not design the park around Lake Merritt. To see what "something larger" means to him, you have to go to Lafayette Square Park, about a mile away in a poorer, less verdant

part of town, where local kids play catch on a grassy, artificial hill that Hood created to echo the domed observatory it displaced. Or to the towering De Young Museum, in San Francisco, where eucalyptus appear to blossom inside the building, thanks to a series of slits in the walls. ("It feels like we're outside," one visitor remarked while peering at the flora.) Or to any of the half-dozen cities across America -- including Pittsburgh; Buffalo; Jackson, Wyoming -- where Hood is now transforming street corners and highway underpasses into public spaces that are relevant, even meaningful, to the communities they serve: black and white and brown, rich and middle class and poor. "We invest very little in the public realm, and that's sad," he says. "Because when you give people good things, good things will come."

A designer who tackles the mundane things of this world may not seem revolutionary at a time when Michael Graves is making teapots for Target, but in landscape architecture, Hood is very much breaking new ground. For decades, modernists such as George Hargreaves, Michael Van Valkenburgh, and Peter Walker -- all white, all Harvard educated -- reigned over the profession with their clean-cut office parks and pristine college campuses, much in the vein of Lake Merritt. "Then Walter came of age, and nobody knew what to do with him," says Charles Waldheim, chair of Harvard's department of landscape architecture. "He was finding value and producing meaning in places that seemingly had none."

Before Hood started designing Splash Pad Park in 1999, for example, it was a deserted traffic island under Oakland's I-580 freeway. "Some people wanted it to be a dog park, others wanted an underground creek, and a few wanted something completely different," says longtime Oakland resident Ken Katz, 67. Today, it's all of the above -- and then some. Cement tiles blanket the apron in front of an amoeba-shaped fountain, engraved with the names of the donors who made the installation possible. Grassy knolls are dotted with palm trees from the original island, as well as newly planted dogwood, a water-hungry plant that thrives off the underlying swampland. "It's a hybrid space," Hood says. "Everyone can find a way in." And they do. Every Saturday, the park hosts a massively popular farmers' market and concert series.

This is public space as Hood believes it should be: multitasking, respectful of the land, rooted in -- and watered by -- the community. "Think about the history of civilization," Hood tells me, as if I'm one of his architecture students at UC Berkeley. "The agora, the piazza, the theater, the street, the Colosseum -- we define ourselves in the public realm. And in America, our public realm is sad. We have to be told how to act." He deepens his voice. "Sit here, look there, understand this, don't walk here, don't do that. It's crazy."

Take the Oakland Museum gardens, designed by Dan Kiley, which are similar to many parks in that the grassy areas are surrounded by railings or raised concrete edges. "You can never get in them. They're always at an edge," Hood says, criticizing a "functionless aesthetic" that is "just about moving people" past green spaces, not into them. "I can never be in the garden, only on the concrete," he says.

Contrast that with Lafayette Square Park, where a semicircular wedge slopes upward from the walkway, inviting patrons onto its grassy surface. And while Hood does use these kinds of formal elements to affect the human experience, he tries to leave the rest up to the public. "I would rather design for a place that gets worn and messy than try to keep something in a pristine state that doesn't seem lived in," Hood says. Outside the De Young, we notice a museum employee on his back, napping in the middle of a large grass triangle, without anyone (or anything) telling him to keep off. "What a great picture," Hood says, smiling as he snaps one with his iPhone.

It's the ultimate validation -- a use of the space that he always intended yet never planned.

"Being a person of color," Hood says, "people tend to look at what I do, because it's outside the norm, and make special allowances." His voice changes pitch as he mocks those who pigeonhole him: " 'Oh, that's just Walter. He does the art thing, he does the inner-city thing, he does the community thing.' "

The thing is, all of that is true. Hood, 52, grew up during desegregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has spent more than 20 years living and working in the heart of Oakland, so he does feel a strong connection to the black community. "You'd have to be pretty dense not to have that experience affect you," he says of his childhood. He has chosen to work almost exclusively in the public realm -- no expensive condo buildings, no corporate complexes. And he has focused his work almost entirely on urban environments.

This is by choice. Hood would love to create art for art's sake -- to, as he puts it, "live on a hill in Italy, with a beautiful cantina and a nice frickin' easel and paints, and just chill." And he's talented enough that he could cash in on corporate gigs and enjoy a cushier life: His long list of accolades includes a Rome Prize and a National Design Award. But he believes he can and should do more. Besides, few others are interested in designing at the nexus of racial tension, bureaucratic apathy, confused residents, limited funding, and shoddy infrastructure.

Hood's success has come largely because he has learned to be a community whisperer, creating spaces that have elements the residents want before they even know it. "Nine times out of 10, the thing they are asking for isn't really what they want," he says, "because they're basing everything on a very particular worldview. It's my job to elevate our conversation, knowing that they're thinking like this" -- he brings his hands together -- "and I'm thinking like this" -- he spreads them apart.

The night before our tour of the Bay Area, Hood was in L.A., meeting with residents of its mostly black, middle-class Crenshaw district about the forthcoming arrival of light rail in the area. He had planned to discuss how to make the various stations more historically significant. Instead, he found himself fielding angry questions about the installation itself, because the city-hired consultants hadn't bothered to explain exactly what light rail was and how it would be built. "These people thought it was going to be just as intrusive as the freeway, because that's all they knew," he tells me, shaking his head.

Had Hood been involved from the start, he would have bussed the Crenshaw residents to San Diego, so they could see an existing system firsthand. Educating the users of his spaces and developing a dialogue with them is part of his process. For instance, in 2006, he took a group from Coliseum Gardens in southern Oakland to two creek-front parks, one a woodsy space in Berkeley and the other a more urban setting in San Jose. He expected his focus group to prefer the Berkeley site, because it was lusher and more stereotypically parklike. But they liked the one that was harder, more developed, deeming the woods "scary," to use Hood's word. "I could do my own thing," he says, "but it wouldn't be as interesting as listening to the people."

Last year, Hood was commissioned to revitalize public spaces in Pittsburgh's historically black Hill District. As soon as he got the twin gigs -- the Garden Passage, a walkway with an art installation at the city's civic arena, and a neighborhood-wide plan called the Green Print -- he hosted a barbecue and did walking tours to get a sense of the community. There were issues aplenty: rising vacancy rates, diminishing foot traffic in stores, long-standing resentment of the new civic arena (its predecessor had displaced local housing in the late '50s), and apathy among residents that stemmed, Hood says, from the belief that they live in a "derelict" community. "Except they don't," he continues. "Ecologically, these communities are the same as the suburbs. They're just suffering from neglect."

With help from a local not-for-profit, Hood collected thousands of color photographs from Hill District residents. When construction begins on the $1.5 million Garden Passage next spring, those images will be embedded in giant glass "curtains" adorning the four terraces along the steps. Hood used a similar technique with historical photos at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Memorial in San Francisco. "The idea," he says, "is that the community that once existed in this place is brought back through another set of layers, like a great performer taking a final bow." Hence the name of the Pittsburgh piece: Curtain Call.

Hood is putting a greater emphasis on green space, too. He affectionately and euphemistically calls the Hill District "a village in the woods," but he hopes to blur the line between the village part and the woods part with, among other things, a clever deployment of flora. He's also turning the streets and corners of several major avenues into vibrant destinations, instead of mere passageways, by adding more seating and lighting. "These corners and streets are vital gathering places," says resident Celita Hickman, 48. By letting people be where they already want to be and do what they already want to do, Hood hopes to reinvigorate the corridors -- and the businesses that line them.

That Hood has not only this vision but also a notion for how to bring it to life "impressed the stew out of me," Hickman says. "He didn't get quite a blank canvas, but he really did embellish. He's a master of that. Seeing things that we don't see. Bringing out something that's already existing and beautiful, and enhancing it."

Hood is more direct, and his explanation of what he is doing summarizes his life's work well. "People were asking me the other day, 'So when is the Green Print gonna start being implemented?' " he says, flashing a grin. "The beauty of this project is it's already there. We just have to dust off the bookshelf and put the stuff back."

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