

SPUR and The Cultural Landscape Foundation Symposium, September 15, 2011

The Bay Area's Modern Landscape Legacy

Sasaki, Walker Associates and The SWA Group-Kalvin Platt

1. Foothill College (1959)

Peter Walker came out to California from the Sasaki, Walker Associates office in Watertown, Massachusetts to set up a San Francisco office in 1959 to oversee the construction of Foothill College, a brand new community college for 3500 students. Hideo Sasaki at that time was the head of the Landscape Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and he kept the Watertown office going.

Foothill College was on a hillside site in Los Altos Hills and the site was graded so the clusters of pavilion like college buildings designed by Ernest Kump were situated on the higher ground in a car free pedestrian environment with varied open spaces. Parking, road access and support uses were below and were connected by ramps and stairs.

2. Golden Gateway, San Francisco, California (1960)

The office soon was part of a winning submission for a 10 acre redevelopment project, in Downtown San Francisco, working with William Wurster, the dean of Bay Area Style architects and DeMars and Reay.

The old produce market was replaced by tall residential towers surrounded by town houses on a second level podium with parking below and retail at the street frontage. The blocks were connected by pedestrian bridges.

3. One Maritime Plaza (1964)

Another part of the San Francisco Downtown redevelopment, connected by pedestrian bridges to the residential areas was an office building by Skidmore, Owens and Merrill which included retail uses on the podium over a parking structure. The podium here was designed as a sculpture garden, with works by Marino Marini and a fountain by Robert Woodard. This plaza provided pedestrian linkage to the large commercial, retail and hotel blocks of the later Embarcadero Center redevelopment.

4. Sidney Walton Square (1965)

A key ingredient of the Golden Gateway redevelopment was this block square open space built at street level that provided a green relief to the tall buildings of the redevelopment area and a transition to the lower rise parts of Downtown to the north and the historic buildings to the west. It soon became a favorite Downtown lunch break and meeting spot to get some sun and social activity. Later, new low rise residential and retail surrounded this urban square.

5. Fashion Island (1968)

I joined Sasaki Walker associates in 1967 and like many firms in the Bay Area our work readily extended to Southern California, both in Urban and suburban projects. At the Irvine Ranch we worked with Welton Beckett's office on the retail portion of Newport Center, the Town Center for the Irvine Ranch New Town.

The shopping center was an outdoor pedestrian mall with a main street and varied focal courtyards and plazas. Several decades later we intensified the center, still keeping the outdoor mall concept working with Jon Jerde as part of a long term relationship with the Irvine Company that continues today from our Laguna Beach office.

6. Weyerhaeuser Headquarters (1969)

As the Bay Area became known for its cluster of design offices, we were able to extend our practice to places like the northwest by teaming with Chuck Bassett of the San Francisco SOM office to design Weyerhaeuser Corporation's unique headquarters on a large wooded site between Seattle and Tacoma.

Here a "horizontal high rise" comprised of stacked and terraced floors each with continuous planters was placed across a gentle swale on the site to create a lake on one side and a meadow on the other. At both ends of this green structure, each floor engaged stepped parking areas set perpendicular to the building and heavily planted. The remaining areas of forest on the site were enhanced working with the company's forest management teams.

7. McKesson Plaza (One Post Plaza)

Along Market Street, then under major refurbishment we continued Halprin's brick paving concept and created a large upper plaza at the focal Montgomery and Post Street corner. As the Montgomery BARTD Station was being built under the street level plaza, we created a sunken plaza with retail shops and a quieter environment half way down to the station.

The stepped walls that take up the grade and define the lower plaza form popular stadium seating to watch the passing parade in this intense pedestrian corner of Downtown San Francisco.

8. Promontory Point and Ohlone College (1970)

We did many projects with Fisher Friedman Architects, a national leader in residential and community design. One of the finest is Promontory Point at the Irvine Ranch overlooking Balboa Bay. The photograph to the right is an entry to Ohlone College for the Fremont-Newark College District in the East Bay. This 120 acre hillside college for 8000 students followed Foothill in a series of new colleges we designed with Ernest Kump.

.9. IBM Santa Teresa, Oakland City Center and Security Pacific Bank (now Bank of America) (1974)

The IBM West Coast Programming Center was on a 700 acre site in Santa Teresa, south of San Jose. A dense cluster of closely linked buildings by McCue, Boone and Tomsick sat over a huge computer installation with its green roof patterns and green sunken courtyards contrasting to the natural rolling hills of the site. The image on the top right is the entry from the Oakland City Center BARTD station to the City Center redevelopment project in Downtown Oakland. To the right below is the Alexander Calder sculpture at the entry to the Bank of America Tower and roof gardens at the Bunker Hill redevelopment in Downtown Los Angeles.

You can see our practice at that time was a vibrant mix of Urban Redevelopment and large outlying centers built on Greenfield sites.

10. Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Concord Performing Arts Center, and San Diego Embarcadero Urban Design Plan (1975)

For the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, we were consultants to the National Park Service for the 90,000 acre Marin County portion, producing there the first comprehensive environmental atlas for a national park. We were a team leader for 100 public workshops on the entire GGNRA'S 100,000 acres and with Bob Royston's firm provided Parkwide Plan concepts and a series of individual unit plans. The goal was to bring people to the vast natural, historic, recreational and educational resources of these public lands while protecting, preserving and ultimately enhancing them for the use of future generations of the Bay Area and nation.

The upper right photograph is the Concord Performing Arts Center, a music pavilion by Frank Gehry set in a huge landform graded so the pavilion was surrounded by outdoor seating and picnic areas and a huge ramp connecting to bus and parking areas.

The lower right is the San Diego Embarcadero plan for the bay front areas of Downtown San Diego, replacing Navy and industrial Port Facilities with increased public access, commercial recreation and park uses. This plan was one of a series we did to comply with the landmark California Coastal Act, opening the coast to public use.

Sasaki Walker Associates in San Francisco becomes The SWA Group

From 1959 when Sasaki Walker Associates came to the Bay Area as a part of an east coast firm to 1975 when Hideo formed Sasaki Associates and Pete and we Principals became The SWA Group as two separate firms, our practice focused on the Bay Area and the west.. In the years since, as a Bay Area based practice, we have expanded nationally and internationally to become a truly group practice in our 7 offices, including one in Shanghai. Through these past four decades, however we have built upon the modern ideas of Landscape Architecture as shown in these early works.