

Surface and Form/Shadow and Light:
Artwork for the Allegheny Riverfront Park
(unpublished statement)

The design of the Allegheny Riverfront Park was the work of a team of five. Members from the landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates included: Michael Van Valkenburgh (principal-in-charge), Matthew Urbanski (project designer), and Laura Solano (project manager). Ann Hamilton (lead artist) and I were the two artists on the team. Working together, we five shared all aspects of designing the park - shaping its overall form, space and circulation patterns, and determining the character of its textures and materials. While each of us brought distinctive sensibilities and varied expertise to these considerations, the nature of our process makes it difficult to point anywhere in particular and claim, "Here is the landscape and there is the art."

We all agreed that the park would physically embrace both its natural and urban site conditions, so we placed the lower park not just beside the Allegheny River, but also in and over the water's edge. Even the flow of cars and trucks streaming along the Tenth Street Bypass remains integral to the landscape. And just as the landscape directly engages its urban/natural context, so our artwork weaves into the structure and fabric of the place. The art, rather than standing apart as an independent experience, contributes a palpably human scale and dimension to the place as a whole. Both in space and through time art and park reinforce one another as a singular system of natural/cultural encounters.

Streets in Pittsburgh run along ridges, and houses and buildings appear as if stacked one atop another like building blocks. Rather than opening out as a picturesque sequence of slowly revealed vistas; here landscape space and form unfold to experience like the flattened perspective of an early 20th Century cubist painting. We likewise imagined our site unfolding vertically, up from the Allegheny River and across Fort Duquesne Boulevard; then stretching laterally, from Ninth Street on the east end to beyond Sixth Street on its west end. Working up/down/out/across and back from this extremely long and narrow site, we layered our material and visual elements to structure a variety of natural and human encounters within a densely compact urban habitat.

Two wedge-shaped **pedestrian ramps**—six feet wide and 350 feet long—flank the south pier of the Seventh Street Bridge to organize the geographic center of the park. These ramp ways mark the threshold between city and river and form our most visible architectural additions to the site. To maximize their sculptural effect, as well as to lighten their visual impact, the north face (towards the river) of each ramp batters slightly inward to the bottom. This face is stained with an earth-toned wash that captures the warmth of late afternoon sunlight and visually counters the rough-hewn bluestone boulders strewn about its base. Huge rectangular screens of Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) float up and off the back (Tenth Street Bypass) side of the ramps to join the geometric formality of the city to the less ordered and more robust landscape of the lower park.

On the riverside of each ramp, oversized, elliptically shaped **bronze handrails** lead visitors down into the lower park. Twisting, turning and hovering above the planar slice of the ramps, the undulating line of the handrails evokes the rolling of water down the river. The ribbon-like forms for the handrails were modeled at our Columbus, Ohio studio as four clay sections each sixteen feet long. At a Philadelphia foundry, each section was molded and cast in sets of eleven for forty-four pieces total. To assure visual variety within each 350 foot length of finished railing, we randomly selected an individual 16-foot piece on site, then rotated it clock-wise, counter clock-wise, or end-to-end before permanently attaching it to the guardrail. Bronze—a metal typically associated with commemorative statues and monuments—is here laid horizontally and becomes polished by touch as visitors leave behind a visible impression of their individual presence in the life of the park.

Our evocation of water moves from hand to foot along **the walking surfaces** of the lower park. From 9th Street to beyond 6th Street, Hamilton and a team of three assistants carefully laid out broad swaths of bulrush (*Typha angustifolia*) leaves and pressed them by hand into the surface of wet concrete. The after-image relief appears like grasses bending and waving below the surface of a stream. Its shallow, undulating pattern responds to the flood plane conditions and changing seasons to fill with snow, or rain or dirt as added tracings of natural and/or social activity within the park.

A differently conceived and textured element greets visitors who arrive at the park by watercraft. Here twenty cast-iron **mooring cleats** placed twenty-five feet apart punctuate the edge of the cantilevered walkway to ease boat tie-up and landing access to the park from the river. These eccentrically shaped, single and double cleats—patterned from clay over short sections of native sycamore branches—mark and bridge the point between water and ground. Their organic shapes and surface texture, together with a patina of rust, make subtle reference to both the natural ecology and industrial history of the site.

In the upper park, our hands as artists become most apparent in the pattern for setting the **bluestone paving**, and in the shape and form of **bluestone seating** in civic plazas between the Sister Bridges at Sixth, Seventh and Ninth Streets. Whereas the cantilevered walkways of the lower park push away from the banks out into the river, the upper park walkways pull back and tilt slightly upward from the edge of the Tenth Street bypass to create two civic gathering places, or rooms. The walkway/floors of these rooms are made of bluestone rectangles that vary in width from two inches to six feet, and in length from two feet to ten feet. With a linear pattern orientated south to north (toward the river), the narrowest paving pieces gather in density toward the center of each plaza. The natural cleft surface and radically varied, though coherently ordered, dimensions of the stone simultaneously remind a body of the movement of water toward a center and of the feel of a boardwalk underfoot.

Pairs of plain **stone benches** gently cup the southern edge of both the east and west plazas. The benches are straightforward in both construction and placement. Three rows of sawn and cleft stone blocks (18" H x 36" L x 24" D) are laid end-to-end and stacked in two tiers for seating. The stone benches are intentionally artless and set into the

landscape as dimensioned facts to sit upon rather than as metaphors to ponder. Shallow banks of lawn swell up behind the benches; while the front, toward the river, is planted as a loose-knit curtain of London Plane trees.

The artist Robert Smithson wrote in 1973 that, “A park can no longer be seen ‘as a thing-in itself,’ but as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region—the park becomes a ‘thing-for-us’.” As artists for the Allegheny Riverfront Park, we attempted to extend this sentiment to our own practice. Our art does not stand in the park as “a thing-in itself”, but it seeks instead to take its place in ongoing relation to a place made as a “thing-for-us”. That place becomes—not by its naming, but because of the entire design team’s commitment to creating both material and experiential relationship to its “physical region”—a park.

Michael Mercil

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