

I Remember Harland Hand

by

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I met Harland Hand in early 1982, on my first Western Chapter field trip. We were having a picnic at the Santa Cruz Arboretum when a tall, silver-haired man walked up to me and asked, by way of introduction, "What kind of car do you have?" Over the years, as a close friendship developed, I realized that Harland would often start in the middle of something, knowing the beginning in his own mind but not voicing the preliminary thoughts.

When he learned that I had a hatchback car, Harland asked if I would take a painting from Santa Cruz to El Cerrito for him. I had no idea who this man was, as he had neglected to introduce himself, and I did not at the time have any reason to want to go to El Cerrito. After a brief conversation, I discovered I was in the presence of my horticultural hero, author of "The Color Garden" (Pacific Horticulture, Spring 1978). I had read this article many times, seeking guidance and inspiration as I struggled to develop a garden on my steep hillside in San Francisco.

The following day I made my first visit to Harland's garden. Full of rocks, concrete, and thousands of plants, its design and emotional effect were inspired by the landscape of the High Sierra, in particular around Silver Lake (52 miles east of Jackson on Highway 88, on the Kit Carson Immigrant Trail). This was Harland's favorite place, the "most thrilling, intimate, and puzzling space" he had ever experienced. Harland described the lake as "a deep blue arabesque sunk in swirling masses of pale gray granite." By the lake were granite-floored "rooms" with shelves, benches, and boulders from which sprung trees gnarled by the alpine winds. Shrubs and flowers crept between the granite slabs, forming natural rock gardens.

In his rockeries Harland grew temperate and sub-tropical plants. He had a huge succulent collection, with many species and cultivars of echeverias and sedums tucked in among the rocks and concrete, often next to little roses or thymes. Harland did not like following rules, particularly in garden design. He would often say, "It works!" And that was what mattered, not that in nature one might never find such combinations of plants.

What struck me about Harland's garden were the beautiful color combinations, his rare plant collection, and the emotionally evocative sense of space. I was overwhelmed at my first visit and went home feeling depressed, wondering how I could ever approximate the beauty of color and space. Harland had a special genius for space, which was particularly evident to me when he remade my steep slope in 1988 and recycled the old brick and cobblestones

from the paths and terrace to suggest the remains of a village near an ancient, unseen castle. In Pamela Harper's recent article in Pacific Horticulture ("Harland Hand: the Artist as Gardener," Spring 1999), she described various Hand gardens. Mine is the "nearly vertical garden in the small space behind an urban rowhouse, the garden's upper level higher than the roof."

I remember watching Harland from the upstairs window, as he worked directly on the land rather than from detailed drawings. Early in the morning he would walk around the mounds of dirt, absorbed in inner thought. When the workers arrived, he knew exactly where he wanted to place the rocks or the wet concrete. One time I arrived home after a long day in tedious depositions to find a little wall of San Francisco cobblestone outside the back door, a surprise wall not on the schematic drawing Harland had shown me before beginning construction. I telephoned him and mentioned the wall. "Isn't it wonderful!" he exclaimed, a statement more than a question.

Several years ago, as Harland was writing his book (which was bought by Chronicle Books and has not yet been published), he told me that the chapter he was having the hardest time with was the one on space. Articulating his theories and concepts of space was naturally difficult, as it is much easier to describe things, such as plants, or colors, for which there is a large vocabulary. He rewrote the chapter on space many times, and recently, when I read the last version, I felt that he had indeed succeeded in describing how to think about space in the garden, and why some spaces are so inspiring to us, and others so dull.

Harland preferred the arabesque to the axis. He liked to repeat curves, layer horizontals, and mass verticals to create a sense of calm. He would contrast verticals and horizontals, angles and curves of various sizes, to invoke a sense of drama and power. Essentially, if one imagines curving lines flowing up from the earth into the sky and back, like giant figure 8's, contrasting with linear elements (benches, yew-like plants), one has a good head start to creating that special sense of space that is characteristic of the Harland Hand gardens.

I recently observed a similar space when, two weeks after Harland passed away, I visited Lipan Point on the east rim of the Grand Canyon. Sitting on this rocky promontory that juts out over the Grand Canyon, I compared the awesome effect of the canyon to the more intimate safety of this little natural garden, so reminiscent of Harland's garden in El Cerrito -- swirling space, lichen-covered rocks forming natural mounds, pleasing planes, wonderful plants, dark and light contrasts, a stunning, distant vista.

How Harland would have loved Lipan Point --- perhaps he had been there, I do not know. But I felt his presence at that moment. To him the garden was a sanctuary in nature, a part of nature in which we can feel safe and connected to

the whole of nature, without being subjected to the dangers of nature. After his trip to the highlands of Papua New Guinea, where he experienced tribal people's need for shelters, trails, and lookouts, he frequently spoke of the need for Western people to include these features in our gardens, for the emotional power they lend to the landscape. At that moment, looking out at the Grand Canyon, all of Harland's teachings came together in my mind, and I felt his enduring presence.

Harland embodied a sense of wonderment, of joy in discovery and problem solving. When he created his gardens, there emerged the artist, the poet, the little boy, the adult who was both practical and spiritual. He put to the task everything he had or could grasp for, and his reach was long and persuasive. Harland was closely connected to limitless landscapes both external and internal. I told Harland that his garden was a "cosmic launching pad," and he had smiled. He did not like to talk about mystical things, but certainly he felt awe when he observed vast expanses of nature or works of art. He loved to think deeply about certain subjects, particularly man in relation to nature.

But gardens were not the only way in which Harland expressed his creativity. He painted, wrote poetry, taught others to think and create. He was the soul of generosity, always willing to share plants, thoughts on garden design, art, nature, philosophy, and politics. He was never bored. When he lay dying, having been told by his doctor that he only had at the most a few more days, he was eager to explore the experience of death. It was another adventure in a lifetime of adventures. He had trekked in mountainous jungles in Papua New Guinea and Meso-America, explored the ruins of classical Greece, survived the trenches of the Battle of the Bulge. For 76 years he had consciously examined the senses, emotions, and intellect. He had lived a full life, and he was not afraid of death. After all, as he often said, "It is all part of nature."

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