

Why I Designed Cancer Parks

What I brought to the experience and what I learned from it.

BY MILOSAV CEKIC

Rebecca Fish Ewan's article in the February *Landscape Architecture* about cancer survivors parks, and especially the accompanying Perspective critiques by Claudia Goetz Phillips, ASLA, and Heidi Hohmann, are right on the money regarding what I would call the clash of nobility of purpose and banality of expression. However you express the phenomenon of cancer

Anchored by the arch and the Earth fountain, the New Orleans park offers a formally rich series of variations on the theme of a column, *above*. Victor Salmones's sculpture, *right*, works with the larger park patterns.



MILOSAV CEKIC, TOP; PAUL BARDAGJY PHOTOGRAPHY, BOTTOM

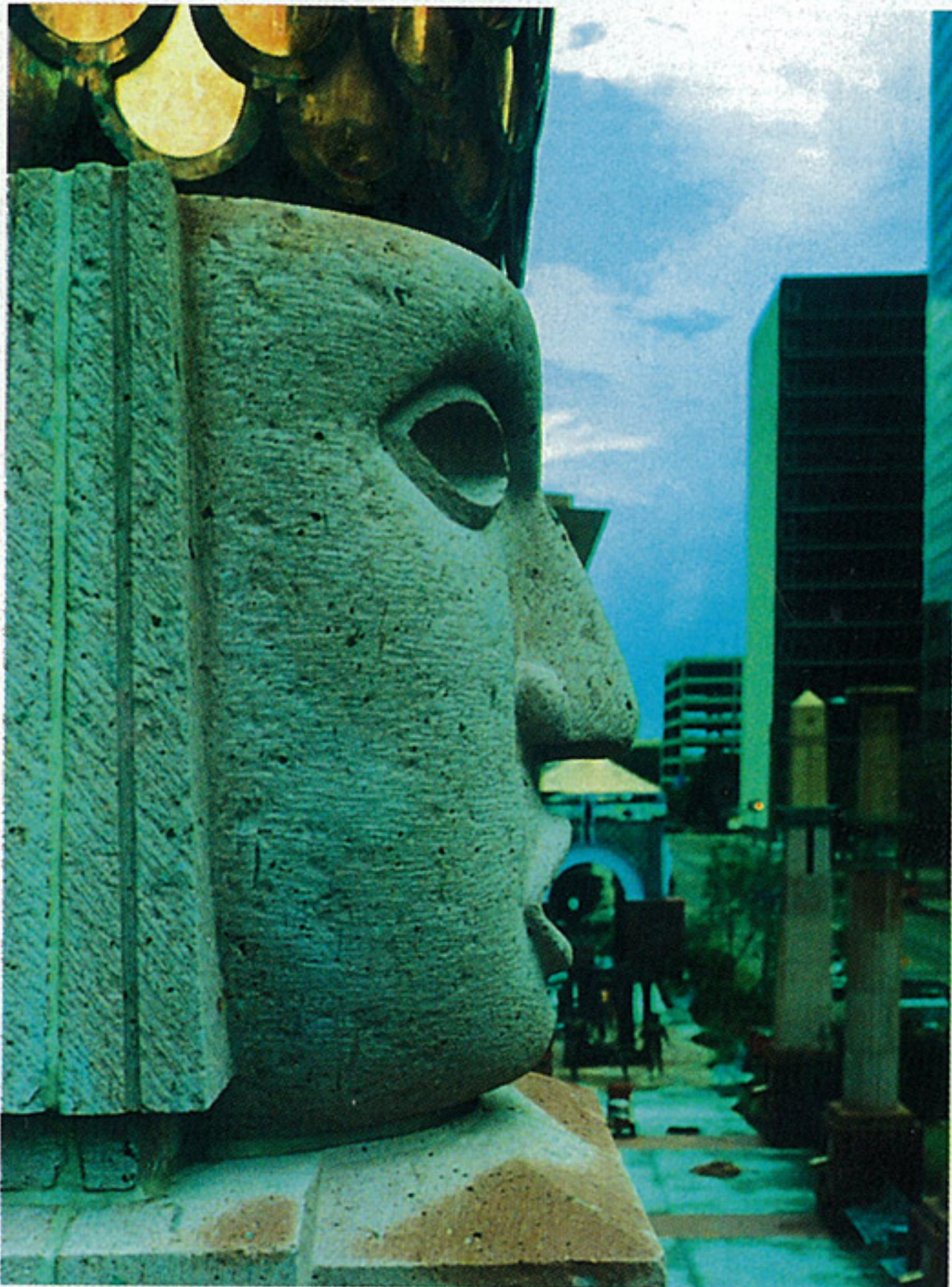


survivors parks, I agree with the writers that there are missed artistic opportunities in most of the projects illustrated.

I should know. I was the architect who won the national competition in 1989 for the original park in Kansas City, Missouri, and who designed and built the first six parks in Kansas City, Houston, New Orleans, Cleveland, Columbus, and Dallas. I also designed cancer survivors parks for sites in Nashville, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Austin—parks that were not built for various reasons.

When I first heard about and later got involved with the projects, I found cancer survivors parks fascinating for two reasons. First, they were the only projects that I knew of to acknowledge the mind-body connection (of which the story of the program's founder Richard Bloch is a living example) and to attempt to help people with cancer through transformation of consciousness. They therefore held great artistic interest for me. Second, they were on a borderline between art and architecture without any

The real challenge in New Orleans was to create a place of special character in the midst of downtown traffic, *above*. Softscape accentuates and complements the design, *below*. A Toltec column head piece detail is shown at *bottom left*.



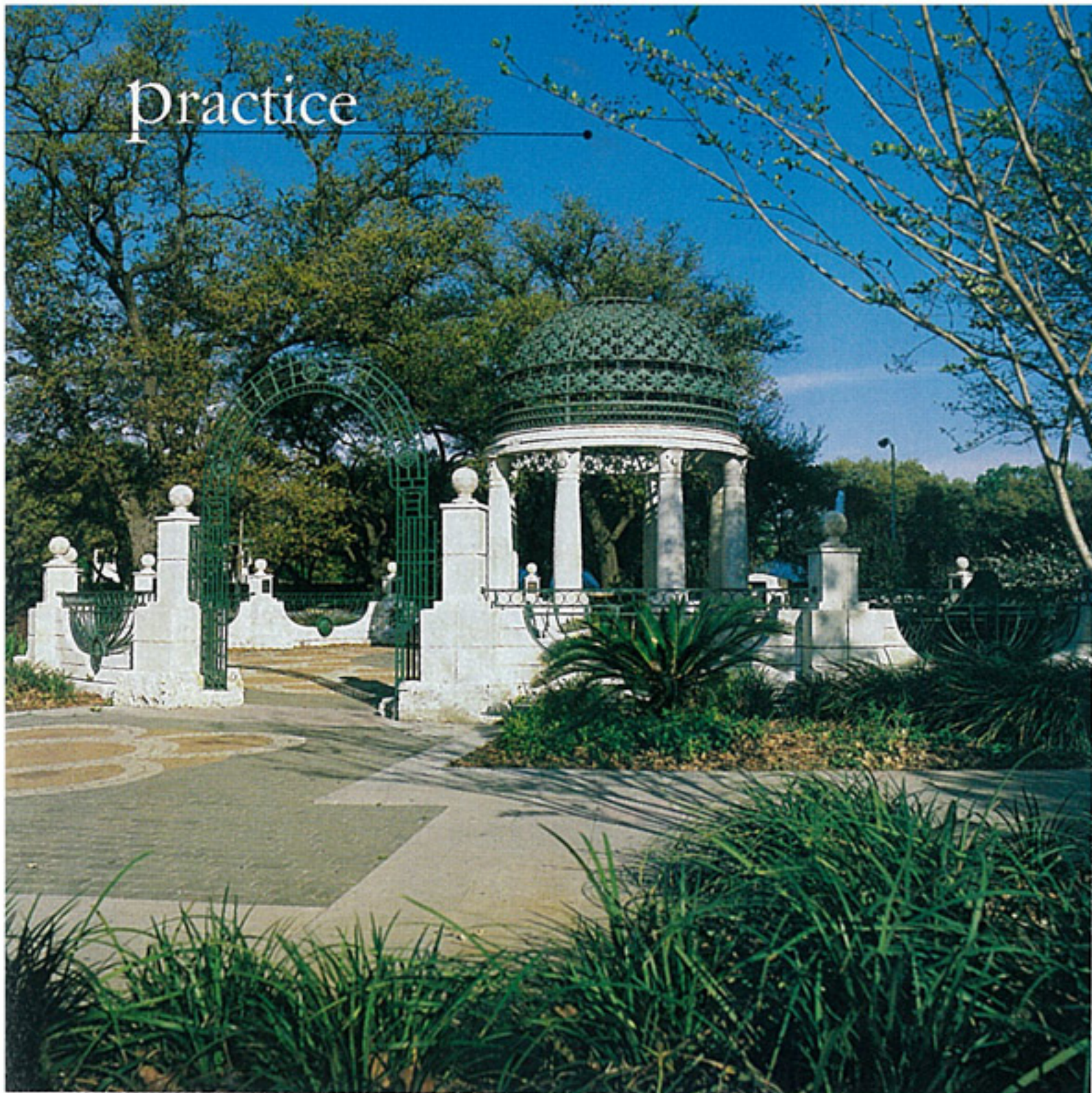
strictly utilitarian building program, thus affording me an opportunity to explore the realm of architecture and consciousness, which has been my interest for a while.

They also presented mandatory components to be incorporated into the parks—the sculpture, the plaques, and the computer—as well as location selection criteria that came from Bloch's view of where the components should be. There was an immediate clash between our two visions, and it manifested itself in several serious disputes that I had with Bloch during the seven years I worked with him.

Although unquestionably well intended by Bloch, the parks represent certain assumptions about how the mind works and how the mind is affected by outside stimuli. I believe those assumptions are erroneous. "Do not do anything subtle," Bloch used to say to me. "We want people to experience the parks quickly, from their cars. At car speed it is hard to see subtle things." He believed that the most important thing for people to see were the words "cancer survivors." Then, if they got cancer, they could remember that there are survivors.

Perhaps this works for some people. But for me, things quickly comprehended quickly disappear from the mind. I believe that the greater the cognitive challenge to penetrate a subject, the longer the resulting thought stays with us, like a joke that takes an effort to get or a work of art that reveals some significant aspect of the human condition when the art is suddenly understood. Sometimes the thought becomes a permanent part of our awareness.

My approach to the designs of the first parks came out of my belief in the power of the mind. I read studies by Carl Simonton



The Houston park's dome, with its 3,000 hand-forged steel leaves, is nestled into an already established park in the Rice University/Hermann Park area, *above and left*. The Houston park site plan is shown *below*.

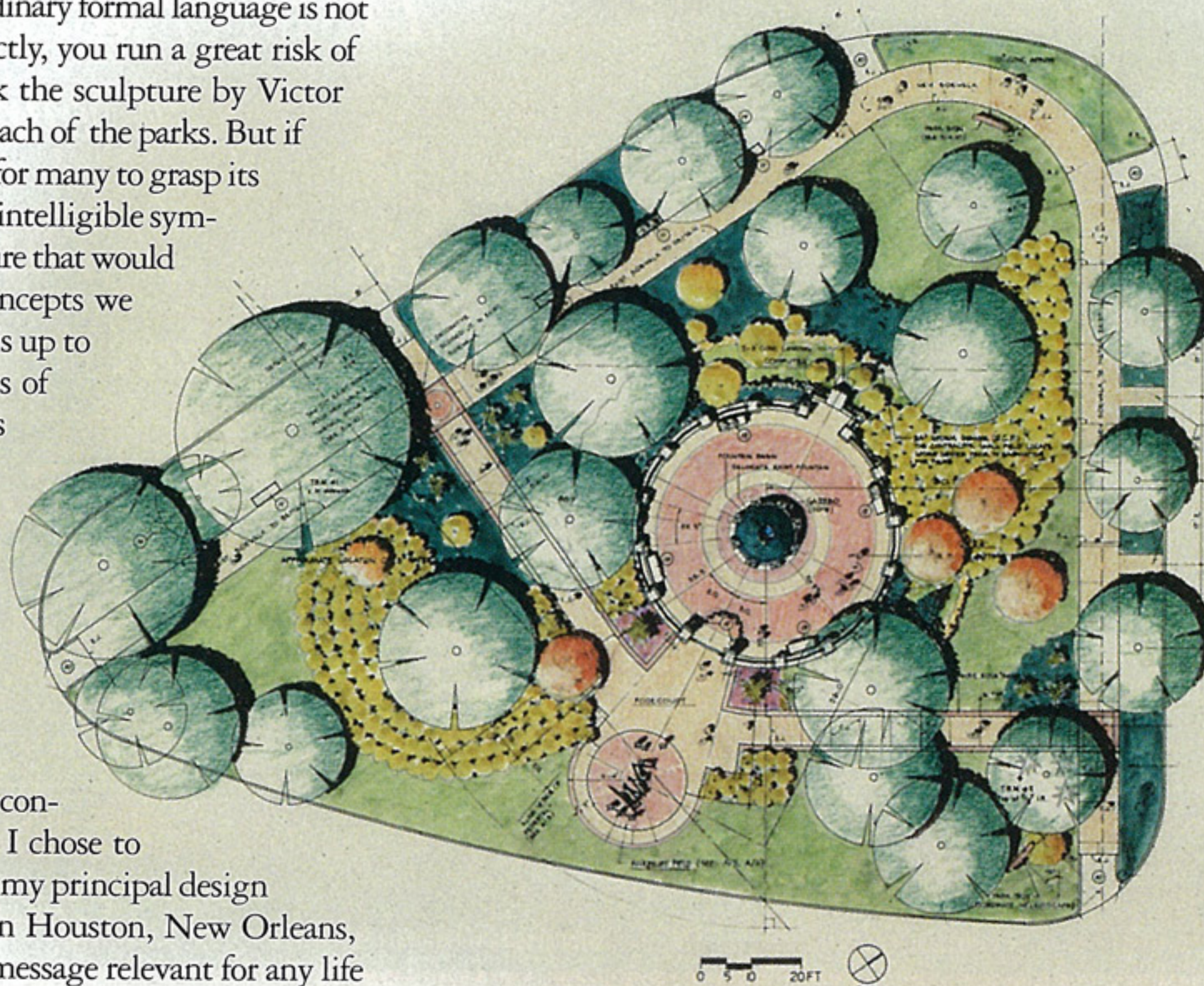
(the originator of the concept of psychoneuroimmunology and founder and medical director of the Simonton Cancer Center in Pacific Palisades, California) and others about why some people survive cancer and some don't and what the mind can really do for the healing process. I also learned that cancer survivors undergo a life-changing transformation initiated by facing the inevitable. Death focuses us like nothing else: Only in the face of death do we realize the preciousness of life.

I set out to find and use the positive aspects of the cancer experience—growth, transformation, unity of being, rebirth—and that was the starting point for my approach to design. But to express a philosophical idea in physical form is not an easy problem, especially if it is a kind of idea for which ordinary formal language is not adequate. If you try to express it directly, you run a great risk of trivializing it, which is what I think the sculpture by Victor Salmons does, and it is replicated in each of the parks. But if the expression is too cryptic, it is hard for many to grasp its message. So my task was to find those intelligible symbols and metaphors shared by our culture that would not trivialize or make obscure the concepts we were trying to express. Ultimately, it is up to the beholder to complete the process of getting the message. But what we as artists have to do is create an indirect, connotative language, a language that has to be penetrated because the meaning of the message is not in the form itself but is found between the lines, behind or beyond the formal expression. Poets know this very well.

After long deliberation and painful confrontation with my own limitations, I chose to use the metaphor of transformation as my principal design motivation, especially for the parks in Houston, New Orleans, and Cleveland. I saw it as a powerful message relevant for any life

(not just for people with cancer, although it applied to them perhaps more directly) and as something that could be formally handled and was acceptable to Richard Bloch. My primary design gestures therefore had to do with issues greater both in concept and in physical expression than the mandatory components of sculptures, plaques, and computers. They became secondary elements within the larger context of an overarching design theme. People approaching these parks from afar could never guess that they had anything to do with cancer until they saw the signs. I wanted to extrapolate from the cancer experience a statement about an edge condition of human existence that could be applicable to any life.

Although I tried to select metaphors easily understood in the





culture, I also chose forms that were within my ability architecturally and technically and within the budget. One form I used more than any other was the column, expressed in a variety of ways, primarily because of my understanding that vertical lines in art represent assertion of the individual, symbolize optimism, and depict ascension. To carry the form to its ultimate meaning, a column is a phallic symbol, in this case representing the vitality and power of life, which has been a strong and recurring symbol in many cultures.

In an attempt to find precedents as ancient as possible and thereby render them relevant for more than just our era, for the park in Cleveland I made use of the celebration column that ancient Romans built to memorialize military victories. In Cleveland, of course, the column form and its art in relief speak of victory over illness. In New Orleans, a colonnade on the median of a busy downtown street forms, through the use of perspective, a contemplative place enhanced by water. In Houston, transformation is more literal: the birth of a smooth column shaft and a lacy steel dome from the rough strata of rock.

Since I am an urban designer as well, my unstated agenda was to make these parks into places of special character, places with a theme. They needed a sense of enclosure and arrival and qualities promoting contemplation and reflection. I also wanted them to promote a more active urban life, which many do. Generally I find that my designs work well as far as creating places. They are interesting, somewhat unusual, but comfortable and well visited. The one in Cleveland is a stop on city bus tours, and in New Orleans the local AIA Chapter devoted a monthly newsletter to that park. When it comes to artistic expression, however, I still find the parks leave a lot to be desired.

The first parks were very site specific and therefore different from one another. They borrowed from local cultures and building traditions and engaged local artisans and craftsmen. The New Orleans park's formal richness, for example, reflects the diversity of formal expressions in that city as well as the tradition of cemetery building. We selected a local artist to design what

Cleveland's "Tree of Life" sculpted brick column is in counterpoint tension with the arbor, above. The Salmones sculpture's expression of the idea of passage is very literal, below.

we called the New Orleans column and to include children from the oncology ward of a hospital there to create poignant graphics that were transferred onto ceramic tiles on the arch frieze. The process was rewarding for the children and their parents; ultimately, it created a place to which many people found a deeper emotional connection.

The art-architecture borderline uniqueness of the project allowed and required a great deal of attention to be placed on craft and craftsmanship. On all the projects I have worked on, there has been a remarkable and rewarding cooperation with various artists and artisans across the country. Their contribution in both design and execution has been considerable and has helped the parks achieve a level of craftsmanship seldom found in contemporary projects. Each project has something unique about it in terms of selection, treatment, and application of materials, all in service of the design concept.

Something else worth mentioning: Maybe because in one way or another we've all been touched by cancer (my father died of lung cancer eight years ago) or maybe because of the uncommon generosity of Richard and Annette Bloch that connected everything and everyone to these projects, we all felt that there was something special in the air. In New Orleans in particular, during design and construction, the client, the city, the architect, and the contractor united around a common goal; everyone was generous. The spirit in which the New Orleans park was done is the prime reason it is the best project I participated in for the Bloch Foundation.

What happened in New Orleans confirmed my belief that human endeavors that start by giving have a wide and unexpected reach. It also reminded me that the only way to create the realm of the "common" is for each one of us to contribute a little. The fantastic Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona by Antonio Gaudi, built entirely from donations, is one of the best examples of this principle at work in the world.

Although I wish I had stayed involved (*Continued on Page 98*)



COURTESY THE SCULPTURE CENTER, CLEVELAND, TOP AND BOTTOM

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(Continued from Page 68) longer, I quit the parks project in 1997. (Why I quit is another story.) It took a while for me to learn what I could do with the gift of \$1 million in different parts of the country. (A million dollars buys about 30 percent less in Cleveland than it does in New Orleans.) It also took time to understand the way that arts and crafts are practiced in each city; to learn what was acceptable to Richard Bloch and what was not; and finally to accomplish larger formal gestures that would not overpower the mandated components of the sculpture, the plaques, and the computer.

If cancer survivors parks are not site specific today, my guess is that the above reasons may play an important role. It could be that the budget, especially in northern states, is so tight that the designers decided to stick with the three basic park components only, foregoing larger gestures because they take too much work and too much uncompensated time.

Work on the Bloch parks project taught me important lessons and provided unexpected revelations about our culture and society and its institutions. One of them was the stigma in our culture attached to the word *cancer* and the idea of death. The park in Nashville was contemplated as a component of a large neighborhood park. When the people living nearby got word of the plans, they circulated and signed petitions and held many meetings, shouting and all, until the project was killed on the grounds that it would be morbid and unreasonable to expose children to such traumatic concepts.

I certainly do not advocate waving death in front of people's faces, especially children's. But we must admit that removing the idea of death as neatly and completely from our daily awareness as we have done in the United States is at best hypocritical because it does not reflect real life. Real life, if we can call it that, is a constant dialectic interplay of forces of creation and destruction. If we are not aware of death, we cannot be fully aware of life. It is only in the face of death that we find the beauty and the preciousness of life. In the words of Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan, "Death can be our best adviser if we keep it at a proper distance." Or in Joseph Campbell's eloquent quote, "When the angel of death approaches—it is horror; when he reaches you—it is bliss." The awareness of our mortality gives life an entirely different meaning and sets a new order of priorities. An abrupt face-to-face

meeting with death can cut us loose from the self-limiting binds our ego creates in our daily awareness, and we have a chance to start living with the big picture in mind.

Another realization was that American culture is basically conservative when it comes to art. Art, more or less, has to be politically correct. Shocking, moving, powerful, naked art is seldom approved by art commissions and other public bodies in our cities. The park projects I participated in, for example, by and large were implemented as more generic versions of the original ideas simply for fear of being controversial. The ideas of a cracking granite egg symbolizing birth in Cleveland, or Indian mounds shooting a scream of joy into the sky in Columbus, a yin and yang fountain in Houston, and a living urban garden in downtown Dallas were either flatly ruled out by Bloch or gradually watered down by park departments to avoid further budget cuts.

There is also a widespread idea that art has to be pretty or aesthetically pleasing. The real beauty of high art is that it reveals some fundamental truth about the human condition, not that it has to clothe itself in pretty form. In fact, prettiness of form sometimes can be a serious hindrance to the power of expression. In art, it is message that is essential; form is secondary. To be an "expedition into the unknown that no science can ever provide," art has to have the power to move, to open, to crush, or to exalt.

Yet another revelation had to do with the public realm in our cities. At present, there are no agencies that plan, finance, and care for the public places in most of our cities. Projects like cancer survivors parks come around very rarely. In New Orleans, which has an impressive public realm, Charles Moore's Piazza D'Italia, completed in 1978, has languished in a condition of near ruin because it is a high-maintenance design in an era deficient in maintenance funds. The Bloch park was the only truly public project in the city in 30 years. I believe this to be a reflection of a deeply ingrained attitude in America about the relationship between the public and the private: The private is heavily favored. It is only in the last decade, with the birth and spread of New Urbanism, that the call for the creation of an intentional public realm in our cities and towns, rather than leftover spaces and afterthoughts, is slowly becoming legitimate.

The greatest promise of the cancer survivors parks projects is the potential shift they may help create in our perception of cancer as a fatal disease. In one of his articles, Carl Simon-ton talks about his work with AIDS patients

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before AIDS was widely perceived as a terminal illness. His success rate was 86 percent. A few years later, when cultural consensus made it terminal, that rate was 23 percent. By creating awareness that there is a large number of people in the United States who survive cancer (estimated at over 10 million), cancer survivors parks may slowly change our perceptions about the disease and perhaps increase chances of survival for many people.

One set of vivid memories I retain from my experience with the Bloch parks is my encounters with cancer survivors themselves. These are special and transformed people because they saw the big picture. Not all, but a great number of them, consider this life to be a gift from God, and they live it that way. What has made them see the big picture was the proximity of death and an undeniable awareness of their own mortality. They don't sweat the small stuff; they are more tolerant, wiser, more supportive, more understanding. And in the numbers they represent in American culture, I hope they become a serious positive influence on how the rest of us view our own lives.

It is this level and quality of consciousness that, when awakened in us, heals and transforms. And it is this aspect of the cancer experience that park designs should espouse to celebrate and express. I hope that future park designers, Richard Bloch, and various cities can create a framework in which cancer survivors parks can become true works of art. **LA**

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PROJECT CREDITS

NEW ORLEANS PARK

Artists: Brian Borrello, John Zeringue, Philippe Klinefelter.

Landscape design: Landscape Images, Alan Mumford.

Contractor: Gootee Construction.

HOUSTON PARK

Artists: Jim Thomas, sculptor; Nick Brumder, wrought iron artist.

Landscape design: Lauren Griffith, ASLA.

Contractor: Mesa Southwest Construction.

CLEVELAND PARK

Artists: Donna Doberful and Jim Thomas, sculptors.

Landscape design: Inside-Outside, Inc.

Contractor: Independence Excavating, Inc.