

COMMON GROUND, Oberlin, OH

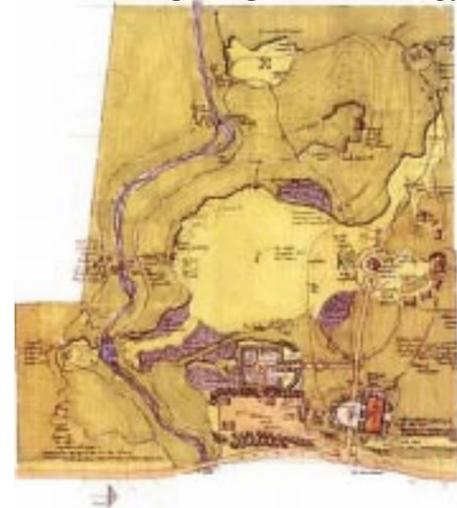
Designed by Visionscapes (Virginia Burt), Ontario, CANADA

The development of the plan for Common Ground was a collaborative effort between the landscape architect, Virginia Burt, founder of Visionscapes, and Rose Bater, executive director of Common Ground, the Cindy Nord Center for Renewal, in Oberlin, Ohio.

The Cindy Nord Center for Renewal offers programs in leadership, workplace development, children and youth, and personal growth. Bater's Catholic order, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary, raised money for a conference center and then purchased 20 acres of surrounding land to create a place of retreat where people could reconnect with their spirits by reconnecting with the earth. "Common Ground values the lessons of Earth as a basis for organizational work, sustainability, global mindfulness, thoughtful leadership, and commitment to community," says Bater.

The Process

Bater wanted a public participation process for developing the Common Ground master plan that would tap into the passion some community members had for the landscape. Birgitt Williams, a facilitator of the group process known as Open Space Technology,



knew of Burt's work and brought her into the project.

Virginia Burt's Ontario firm specializes in creating sacred spaces and healing gardens with the intent, in part, to heal the earth. Her approach as holistic, including body, mind, emotion, and spirit.

According to Burt, "open space" does not refer to the recreation-oriented land use; rather, it is the environment in which group participants are open to creativity, innovation, play, and spirit.

Open Space Technology enables a group to create a shared vision. Participants sit in a circle and no one is identified as a leader, which encourages anyone to come forward to take leadership and acknowledges the potential for such leadership in every person. Creating the master plan was a community event involving seventy people — the shared wisdom of a cross-section of the community. There was also an evening of storytelling about the Common Ground landscape, including about about forty participants.

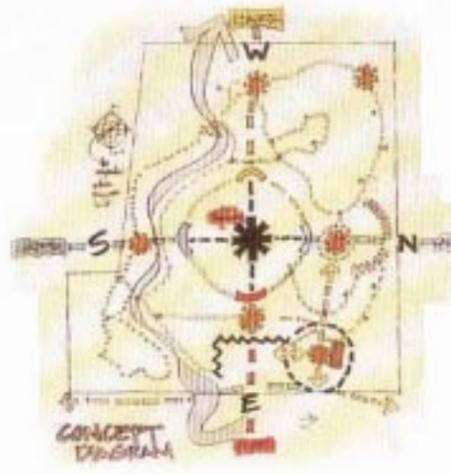
At the close of the community-input event, five votes were given to each participant to prioritize the plan recommendations. In the Open Space Technology approach, this determines where the collective passion and responsibility lie. Capturing the collective passion of the group, Burt expressed it in the master plan, which she produced in forty days.

The Design

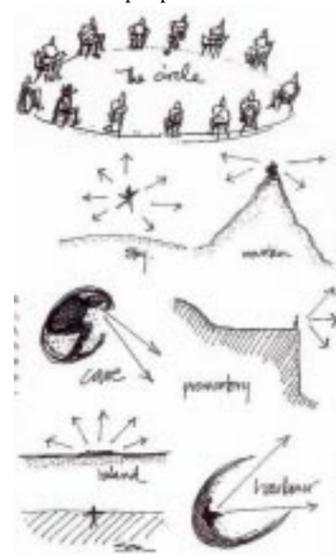
The Common Ground landscape is diverse in its topography and contains the east fork of the Vermillion River, considered the region's best and most diverse riparian system that meets the standards for the state's "Scenic River" des-

ignation. Previously the land had been developed for recreation and included a swimming pool and tennis and basketball courts. Visionscapes' directive was to develop a master plan to transform the recreation-oriented landscape into meditation places and outdoor gathering spaces. The plan won an ALSA Merit Award in 1999.

Virginia Burt says that having won an award from the landscape architecture profession validated that the profession is ready to look at things differently. She believes that her approach to landscape architecture



Burt integrated the four cardinal directions and the seven spiritual landscape archetypes into the healing places of the Common Ground retreat, as informed by the storytelling that occurred during the public input process.

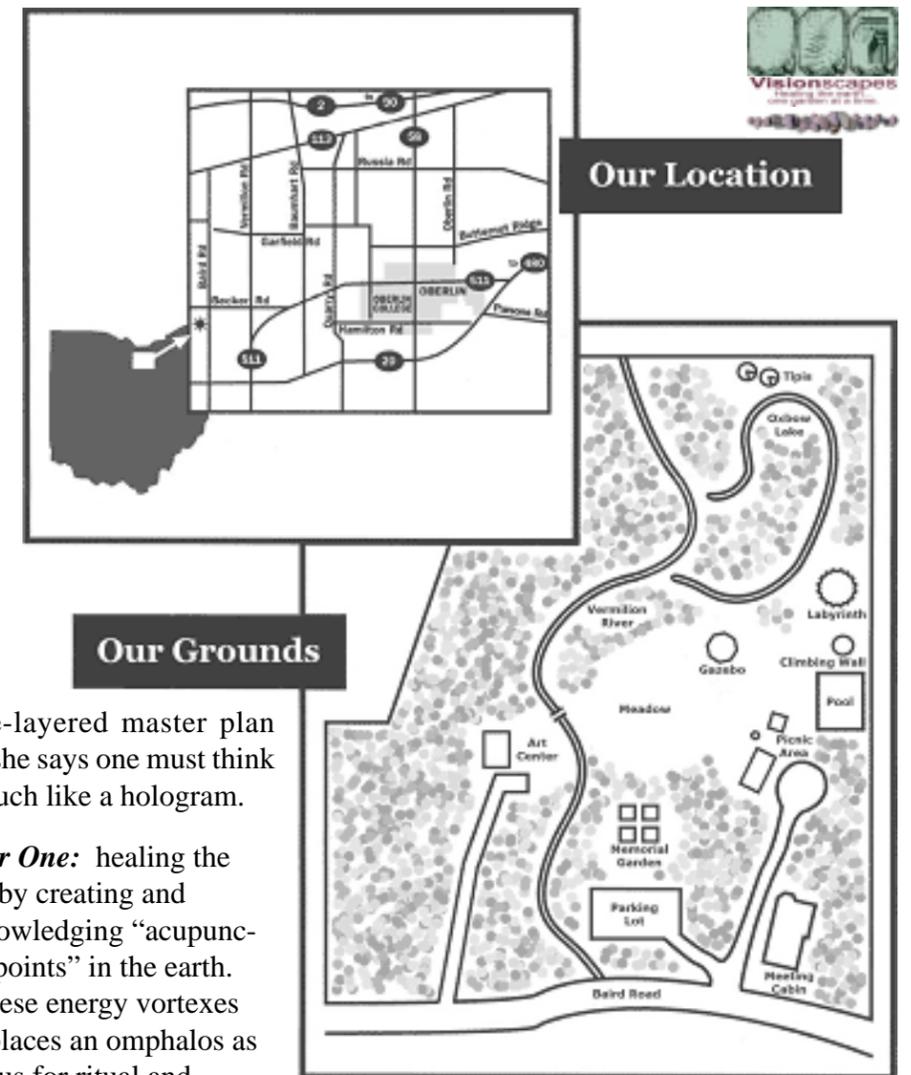


has the potential to drastically affect the profession. "Landscape architects are those people who can heal the land," she says. "We have the ability, the training, and the sacred trust to make our earth more healthy, to be healers of the earth." She adds that her work "is not a journey of ego. It is not about putting who you are as a designer on the landscape."

Burt relied heavily on symbolism to develop the archetypal places and paths in her master plan for Common Ground. She planned the site as a series of experiences that are part of a visitor's journey. Each path has a departure point, a destination point, and events along the way that are intended to be a series of discoveries of both self and the landscape: places to sit or to be active, and to make intentional connections with nature. Interpretations of the land and its ecology are also found along the journey.

Entering the site from the road, the visitor comes upon the entry to the conference center where Burt proposed a paved half circle around a navel stone, or omphalos (from Greek mythology), to identify a healing energy vortex in the earth. The visitor then descends down a processional walkway to a memorial garden that fits into the natural edge of the hillside, carved from the old river channel, and forms an island.

To understand a landscape, Burt opens herself to receiving impressions on multiple levels. "It is not a level beyond the five senses, but an aspect of the place itself," Burt explains. It is our "emotional, mental, and spiritual response." Through her intuition and meditation on the site, Burt determined that the Common Ground landscape needed spiritual healing. Consequently, she created a



three-layered master plan that she says one must think of much like a hologram.

Layer One: healing the land by creating and acknowledging "acupuncture points" in the earth. At these energy vortexes she places an omphalos as a focus for ritual and meditation.



Layer Two: uses healing properties of a medicine wheel, honoring the four cardinal directions of north, east, south, and west. She encouraged introspective walking meditation with a square labyrinth — formed by dwarf shrubs — around the planting beds of homeopathic plants and edible herbs.

Layer Three: naturally occurring features -- the river, the forest, the pine grove, and a steep hill. This layer identifies the seven spiritual landscape archetypes taken from Julie Moir Messervy's book, *The Inward*

Garden and relate to seven vantage points in the landscape: the sea (immersion), the cave (nestling) the harbor (embracing), the promontory (extension), the island (separateness), the mountain (transformation), and the sky (transcendence)."

References:

"Forty Days and Forty Nights," *Landscape Architecture*, Sept., 2000.

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