



## Community Practices: Innovative Engagement in Eco-Art

There are so many exciting interdisciplinary community ecological art projects happening around the world. This issue explores a small sampling of these to inspire, educate and relay the importance of this vital work.

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The Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED) at Allegheny College works to catalyze actions related to sustainable economic and environmental development in Northwest Pennsylvania. Over the past decade CEED has engaged students, faculty, and the community in creating innovative approaches to environmental stewardship, environmental education, and regional revitalization. CEED's projects focus on the arts, community health, ecotourism, forestry, green business--including sustainable management and manufacturing--local foods, local schools, and water. Each of these projects utilizes pedagogy of engagement, with place-based, active learning at the heart of our work to make a difference in our community and in people's lives. As an example, CEED's Arts & Environment Initiative (A&EI) uses art to: 1) promote regional revitalization and beautification; 2) generate awareness of environmental problems; 3) teach environmental sustainability; 4) change how people think about and react to the environment around them; and 5) support and extend coursework in the College's Arts and the Environment interdisciplinary minor. Through the transformative power of art, students and community partners use art to revitalize, beautify and create a strong sense of place.

As is the case with all CEED projects/ initiatives, A&EI projects focus on site-specific environmental problems, and address two larger issues: first, how to provide sustainable approaches to revitalization and community development, and second, how to create greater environmental awareness. One example of how this works can be found in our six-year partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), and the resulting installation artworks.

Constructed entirely from discarded road signs, both *Signs & Flowers* (2000 – 01) and *Read Between the Signs* (2002 – 06) exemplify large scale, community-centered, environmentally focused, public art collaborations. Their location along Route 322/historic Route 6, perhaps the busiest road in the County (some 24,000 cars pass the site daily), ensures that many people who typically do not look at art, see these sculptures. While demonstrating important possibilities for community building and signaling the importance of creativity and reuse, both projects also transform the drive into Meadville from a typical American no-place with nondescript hotels, restaurants and gas stations into a unique site that draws tourists and highlights what is most valued in our community. In addition, both projects, but especially *Read Between the Signs*, engaged the local community in various aspects of design, fabrication and planning, and represent best practices for community based collaborations.



*Signs & Flowers*; 2000-1

*Signs & Flowers* (2001) uses recycled soil and ground up tires (for mulch) to create a post-industrial garden planted with 12 larger than life-size sculptural flowers constructed from reclaimed road signs. These enormous flowers serve as a metaphor for our need to simultaneously control and subvert our environment. PennDOT initiated this project in 2000 when they redid the entry to their parking lot; they asked if A&EI could develop an installation that would draw attention to the site, serve as a form of signage, while simultaneously reducing maintenance needs for the 300' x 40' embankment. Various constituents of the local community including PennDOT employees, city officials, local landscape businesses, tool and die shops, and local residents helped plan the project; it was fabricated by Allegheny students and PennDOT employees. In 2002, when *Signs & Flowers* was completed, we realized that we could extend the impact of our work, and draw the larger community more deeply into our collaboration.

Subsequently, a commitment from PennDOT and Allegheny to support a new project, *Read Between the Signs* was launched. Support from the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation's Artists and Communities Grant in 2003 and 2004 allowed us to continue work on this community-based project. Standing between 7' – 10' tall, *Read Between the Signs* is a sculptural relief that surrounds and screens PennDOT's storage lot and will eventually span 1,200'; 730' have been completed to date. The project celebrates the landscape, environment and community of Crawford County and has come to represent a collective cognitive map of the landscape, architecture and community events that are most valued locally. Included are two kinetic elements – a 10' Ferris wheel and a 20' section of stream complete with jumping fish– both powered by recycled solar powered signboards. Community charrettes are held annually at PennDOT's Summer of Safety program where we gather input about what the community values and wants to see featured in the relief; to date over 600 community members have actively engaged in this process. During the winter of 2005 we met with 7th grade classes (over 250 middle school students) in the local school district to gather their ideas for the project, and to share our ideas about the power of art to respond to community and environmental needs. This year we are working with the 4th, 5th and 6th grade classes in one of the districts elementary schools to further community involvement. These dialogues with the community have allowed us to stretch community awareness of our work, while also getting local residents to begin to think about what makes Meadville unique, and what is needed to support, express, and celebrate that uniqueness. The images are literally reflected in the relief and mirror to us the importance of our home, and our connection to the environment.



*Read Between the Signs; 2002-06.*

Both *Signs & Flowers* and *Read Between the Signs* have helped build community and foster a climate of optimism that is so contagious it cannot be ignored. In addition, because all of the projects incorporate recycled materials, they provide a constant reminder of the importance of creative reuse. Through this, they prompt viewers to reconsider and re-vision their relationship to the natural environment and their community. Our work with PennDOT has helped CEED articulate a new project that places our natural assets, primarily Mill Run, an historically significant stream that winds its way through Meadville, at the heart of community and economic development efforts. Our community is poised to work with us on this venture, building on the excitement that our signart projects have generated and their demonstration that art and community action aimed at environmental concerns can in fact create real change.

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*Read Between the Signs; hills, barn, silo*

The Marvin Gaye song, *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)* rose to the heights of Motown charts in 1971 and remains there to this day as a musical legend. In the song Gaye mourns poisons in the wind, oil wasted on the oceans, fish full of mercury, and radiation in the ground. He laments, “What about this overcrowded land? How much more abuse from man can you stand?”

Mercy motivates people to care for the needy. It is usually praised as an honorable trait, an example of righteous behavior and a sign of noble intention. Snags, however, arise when the impartial eye of justice is trained upon well-meaning acts of mercy that are directed to ecological considerations. Those who study population dynamics often conclude that mercy may actually interfere with the resilience, adaptability, and vitality of organisms. This is because, in the absence of merciful aid and protection, only fit organisms survive to reproduce. Each generation, therefore, inherits the vigorous traits of its strongest ancestors. In any ecosystem, all organisms are created with equal opportunity to engage in the struggle for their own survival. They can't all be winners.



*Gardens of Desire*, ground preparation & canal clearing, 1999.

No green thumbs are required for the gardens referred to in *Gardens of Desire* (1999), a public art project conducted by Jean Grant. Nor is there need for gloves, hedge trimmers, trowels, and other indicators of humans and plants enjoying a mutually beneficial relationship. This work replaces such respectful nurturing with contrasting extremes of interaction. One interaction displays complete dependency of plants upon humans that prevails in contrived hydroponics cultivation. The other presents complete disengagement of humans from plants that grow in untended thickets.

Grant intensified her exploration of the affects of dispensing and withholding care by using wild seeds for both parts of the project. Grant then added a human element to this experiment by inviting a group of ‘wild’ young women who were at risk and on probation to tend the hydroponics gardens indoors and scatter seeds and observe the same plants outdoors. The girls were members of the Venus Young Women’s Organization that provided assistance to disadvantaged girls growing up in a region that was demoralized by multigenerational unemployment, social unrest, and few prospects for improvement. Grant explained that they were surviving like weeds. “This project used wild flowers as a metaphor for the wild young women of the project. It was about the difficulty of growing wild things in institutions. In Liverpool, the poor remain in depressed cities because they have no other options. ..Still they survive. Botanical survival is very similar.”

Grant worked with the young women to construct an indoor environment to grow the wild flowers that would normally sprout in the early springtime in that region. The girls planted half the seeds indoors under the controlled circumstances of hydroponics. This polythene structure was improvised out of gym bars, two by two timber, and polythene sheeting. They scattered similar seeds outdoors and were instructed not to intervene in their development. This meant stifling the impulse to nurture the outdoor plants exposed to harsh conditions. In this manner they activated contrasting strategies of mercy and trust.



*Gardens of Desire*, view showing housing,

Because the indoor garden was completely contrived, the girls could determine the plants' growing conditions. They learned a constructive life lesson when their efforts were foiled by the inflexible regimens imposed by the administration of the school where the garden was constructed. Grant comments, "I thought it would be difficult to grow the seeds inside because we needed to create winter conditions indoors, the climate in which British plants flourish and need at that time of year. But I hadn't expected so many institutional difficulties." First the plants got too much light because the lights could not be turned off during the school session. Then they got too little light because the lights could not be turned on during a holiday recess. Keeping temperatures low was impossible because of central heating. Furthermore, the school was completely shut over the Easter holiday so the girls could not gain access to care for their plants. In all these ways hydroponics management was thwarted by academic regulation.



*Gardens of Desire*, hydroponics seedlings transplanted outdoors, 1999.

Noble efforts and good intentions could not surmount these institutionally imposed misfortunes. The environment designed specifically to exclude the elements produced fragile and straggly plants. The young women described them as 'anorexic'. At the same time, the seemingly adverse conditions imposed by the English climate suited the seeds planted outside. These plants not only coped, they sprouted and grew into hardy bright green plants. The girls noted this difference and decided to remove the feeble plants from their institutional confinement and expose them to the inclement conditions that were so hospitable for the plants in the control group. The thriving thicket plants were transferred too. Grant explains the results, "Of course, the move was more difficult for the plants that were brought up in a situation that didn't accustom them to being outside. We tried.

The wild ones outdoors transplanted with no problem at all. Very few of the ones reared inside survived."

The girls were impressed by the withered appearance of the plants that had been subjected to institutional regimens and the resilience of the plants exposed to the elements. The contrast demonstrated the disadvantages of being subjected to conditions that are imposed and enforced, even when those actions are motivated by good will. Like the plants, the girls too were being provided for within rigid institutional structures. They began to realize that their support system taught them how to conform to rules like showing up on time, but not how to become responsible for themselves. They concluded that regulated institutional care was not going to alleviate child abuse, drug addiction, poverty, and unemployment. This led to discussions about how they might raise their children to provide more promising life prospects. Grant comments, "The young women shared ideas about love and care. They saw the plants die even though they loved them as much as they could. They began to understand how the wrong kind of care can make things die. They asked me many questions. Have we loved the hydroponics plants too much? What does it mean to grow up like a wild flower?" Grant concludes, "Young people need support, but they need different kind of support than they were getting."



*Gardens of Desire*, detail in summer, 1999.

<sup>1</sup>All quotes from interview with the artist on August 30, 2005.

All images courtesy of the artist.

Linda Weintraub is a curator & author: recent publication of the series Avant-Guardians: Textlets in Art and Ecology. Information at [www.Avant-Guardians.com](http://www.Avant-Guardians.com)

Jean Grant's art can be viewed at <http://avant-guardians.com/grant/index.html>

# DIARY OF AN INTERDUNAL SWALE

Lillian Ball

Inspired by Joseph Beuys: "Diary of Seychelles"

July 17, 2004 Drafted as chair of committee to prevent building in the wetlands at a Kenney's Beach Civic Association annual meeting.

7/20 Conceptualized the 11-parcel wetland as an entire ecosystem requiring preservation purchase of whole area. Peconic Land Trust will facilitate process.

7/26 KBCA president received notification of Department of Environmental Conservation permit allowing a house next to the cranberry bog. Only 30 days to appeal. Realizing this is a fulltime job, a new passionate kind of art project.

7/27 The Nature Conservancy makes identity suggestions for publicity. Tactics must appeal to the multiple stakeholders in this community who have a wide range of politics. Thinking about the collaborative nature of effort in terms of Beuys' Social Sculpture concept.

8/8 Hired a PHD botanist to make report and delineate wetland plants on aerial map. It's a globally rare, maritime freshwater interdunal swale, unique on the North Fork, with only 5 in NY State. There are native cranberries, carnivorous sundews, and the endangered *Iris Prismatica*.

8/18 Made first public pitch for Southold Trustees to revoke a three-year-old variance based on the new botanical information. Felt like a performance that needed a blackboard. Outreach to involve the town ecological planner and Trustee's ecologist. Strategy references planting the proverbial seed as Beuys did with "7000 Oaks" and "Defense of Nature".

8/23 Landowner agrees to sell us first lot. Southold Land Preservation committee will give 20% to purchase of first lot, possibly all lots, from preservation tax fund. Started photographing this parcel.

8/25 Filed a last minute Article 78 lawsuit with pro bono lawyer, against DEC as our only appeal. One lawyer refused our case as hopeless. Committee is reluctant to pay a lawyer or file lawsuit. Sometimes feel it would more efficient to do everything myself, but negotiation is integral to Social Sculpture process.

9/8 Suffolk Times article/photo "Save Great Pond" defines "interdunal swale" and emphasizes our non-adversarial goal: Everyone can win: landowners, the neighborhood, and the ecosystem.

9/22 Peconic Land Trust Board members visit to site, in order to assess priorities. They understand sustainability, since stewardship is integral to their strategy.

9/28 NY Department of State called to say they want to put our interdunal swale on the DOS "Significant Habitat" maps. Sowing seeds.

10/7 Natural Heritage Program's ecologist reports: building on the dunes will compromise the quality of the wetland occurrence even with the normal 100' setbacks.

10/12 Sent out PLT fundraising letters. In order to ensure the ecosystem's survival, current reality requires building a coalition between citizens + government to buy the properties. A range of value systems can relate to the irreplaceable nature of the wetlands.



Lillian Ball, 3rd from right, with town & county officials

11/1 KCBA follow-up letters emphasize the leveraged interaction between biologists, neighbors, town, county, and Land Trust. Audubon Society gives support and donations.

11/18 Suffolk County Health Dept hearing began stating that they are not interested in ecology, but even water table stats didn't interest them. Nine KBCA members came, eight sent eloquent letters protesting nearby threatened wells, but to no avail.

12/8 Submitted Long Island Sound Future Fund Grant with PLT as sponsor + constructive input from Fish and Wildlife staff.

12/13 Meeting with all parties: Suffolk County planning, PLT and Southold Town Land Preservation. A strong coalition if we can inspire landowners.

1/19/2005 Trustees meeting on building permit - requires further consideration of reports. Opposition objections were rebuffed. A blizzard prevented many from participating but still we had 12 supporters present.

2/4 Money to purchase first lot has been raised. PLT is drawing up contract sale for perpetual preservation. Closing 4/15/05. The challenge was to inspire factions with such different values to participate.

2/16 Had an idea, based on comment from town supervisor, for an interactive Wetland game installation "seen through the eyes of all participants".

4/5 Great Pond Wetland Preservation gets approved planning steps resolution through our legislator and Suffolk County Open Space Purchase Program.

4/12 Southold Town Board voted to include all targeted lots on the Community Preservation List. This allows the town to contribute up to 25% on future acquisitions and proves their involvement.

4/20 At 1 AM the Board of Trustees unanimously voted to revoke the wetlands building permit given in 2002. Brave decision since they will be sued by unhappy landowners.

5/12 PLT and I go to the awards ceremony for our restoration and education grant from Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Photo taken with DEC official who tells us "next time call me". Social Sculpture is well under construction.

4/11/06 The race to preserve wetland continues, though Suffolk County is now under contract to buy two more lots of the interdunal swale. Since the diary, the ongoing preservation project has resulted in series of artwork entitled "Leap of Faith" - video installations, photos, and an interactive spatial game based on the ancient game of Go. Recently, I was appointed to the Southold Town Land Preservation Committee, where I hope to have an impact on acquisitions of open space, and farmland made with the Community Preservation Fund.



**"Blue Flag, Pink Flag", Botanist's View of the Endangered Iris Prismatica, 2005, Lillian Ball.**

## Beneath land + Water: A Project for Elkhorn City, KY 2000-2005

*"The rivers make the mountains, and the mountains make the people."* Appalachian folk saying

Lead Artists: Suzanne Lacy and Susan Leibovitz Steinman (CA). With Yutaka Kobayashi (Japan)

For no pay and often on our own dollar, we were drawn to work in a small riverfront town in eastern Appalachia. We were invited to create locally generated, participatory, activist public art to serve community-stated needs. Starting out in 2000 we had no idea where this public-interest-art process would lead, or that it would take six years.

**THE REGION** Appalachia abounds in paradox. The mountains are grand, ecologically diverse and economically ravaged. Invasive kudzu smothers miles of rich deciduous forests of redbud, dogwood and rhododendron. Extraction industries (strip mining, natural gas drilling and clear cutting) deplete nonrenewable resources, earn big money for multinationals, and leave locals with little to show for years of hard manual labor.

**THE PEOPLE** Tight-knit, deeply rooted, multigenerational families live in "hollers"—habitable pockets carved by rivers over millennia. The average income is half the national average. 50% don't finish high school. More than 50% are unemployed. Health problems are rampant—black lung, cancer, heart disease, poor diet, drug addiction. Eschewing stereotypes, we find people determined to preserve resources and create a cleaner economy. Collectively, they are smart, tough, down-to-earth, welcoming and humorous, but depressed and angry at the extent outside interests control their lives.

**THE WATERSHED** Elkhorn City (EC) sits on the banks of the Russell Fork River, a tributary to the Big Sandy, whose watershed starts higher in Virginia, and flows downstream to the Ohio, where its waters join the Mississippi, Gulf of Mexico, and eventually, the Atlantic Ocean. How EC cares for its river affects a wider world.

**ASSET BASED PLANNING** The EC Heritage Council, our host, has ambitious grassroots plans to develop a sustainable economy via "green tourism." Above town, world-class rapids cascade through the Breaks—the "Grand Canyon of the South." A sizeable multi-state audience of kayakers, campers, and hikers visit Breaks Interstate Park annually. The newly built Pine Mountain Trail ends nearby. If EC could connect to these nearby assets, its dream of green tourism seems tantalizingly possible.

The EC waterfront was a park-in-waiting, hemmed in by asphalt parking lots. A peeling sign listing native birds and unprotected birdhouses constituted a "bird sanctuary." Assets were an attractive historic red caboose (an ersatz "visitor center"), river viewing decks, and easy access to the river. With intervention, a revitalized riverfront could become habitat to butterflies, birds, fish, and an inviting site for human recreation and wildlife viewing.

**ETHICS** Respecting people and place, we formulated work ethics. We decided to take nothing but memories and friendships, and to bring all we could—grants, connections, labor, talent—to the civic table. Joining local momentum, we added "art" to the work of green place making.

**ENGAGING COMMUNITY** Traditionally engaged in unions, politics and churches, residents readily supported the project, painting 400+ tiles in schools and public events, helping install murals and plants, building the park, and giving help in kind. Teachers collaborated. Students propagated plants in classrooms and planted them on field trips. Community-wide planting days turned into tile workshops, barbeques, and social events.

Annually at spring break, Otis College of Art & Design students helped collect river stories, pour concrete, clean the riverbank, paint blue lines and murals, and assist high school and elementary school ecoart and ecology workshops.





## THE PROJECT: *ELKHORN CITY RIVERWALK: THE BLUE LINE TRAIL*

Our plan focused on local experience of the land—as a site of heritage and as a generator of regional wealth—and the river—as an indicator of ecological health and a moving force that connects them, upstream and down, with the rest of the country.

Metaphor and unifying concept emerged: a circular walking trail to connect riverfront and Main Street, knitting together natural and built environment. Cheap, dramatic intervention was needed. The Blue Line Trail was made “on a nickel” with a paintbrush. Striking graphic lines, signs and signature walls painted vivid blue refer to river, sky, and railroad history. The 12'x25' River Heritage Quilt tile mural commands major visibility for the Trail, anchoring place, pride, and identity.



### COMPONENTS:

- o THE BLUE LINE TRAIL and signage. Walkers are visually drawn around the trail by recurring graphics: 3” wide x 12’ to 20’ long blue lines, “The Blue Line Trail” text, and one iconic painted tile--a blue river-like line. Square numbered blue signs orientate walkers to their Trail location.
- o Revitalized RIVERFRONT PARK:
  - A garden with 30+ species of native plants and trees, created with student and resident help, supports new butterfly and bird habitats.
  - The garden reestablishes a permeable riparian zone to filter storm runoff from encroaching asphalt.
  - Collected personal river memories are sandblasted on five unique sculpture benches made of local quarry stone and concrete.
  - Existing riverfront birdhouses were refurbished and painted blue.
  - Blue lines edge refurbished existing wood viewing decks. An old picnic table was refreshed with students’ painted tiles of butterflies.
  - Otis students’ tile mural next to the garden identifies its native flowers; and view deck interpretive signs identify native birds, fish and butterflies that may be spotted along the riverfront.
  - On an unsightly concrete trailside bridge abutment, Otis students painted a silhouetted blue and white mural that reads, “The Rivers Make the Mountains. The Mountains Make the People.”
  - Asphalt section next to the caboose was removed and planted.
  - Future plans include a mini-wetland to clean run-off water from a nearby gas station, before it reaches the river.



- COMMUNITY MURALS: Celebrating local history and ecology, local paintings star in artist-designed tile murals throughout the Trail. On Main Street, working from archives, Otis students created a “photo album” mural of by-gone buildings.
  - TOURIST BROCHURE: Sophisticated use of local portraits touts EC’s self-revision—“WHERE NATURE MEETS CULTURE.”
- WEBSITE: <[www.elkhorncity.org/artsandculture](http://www.elkhorncity.org/artsandculture)> documents the project.



**SUCCESS** The project's success has attracted grants, awards and growing support from institutions and regional artists. A National Park Service Rivers & Trails Technical Assistance grant is fostering trail building from Pine Mountain and the Breaks through EC to downstream communities. Our collaborating EC theater director has been hired as the first County Arts coordinator. A Louisville artist has initiated another EC mural. Suzanne Lacy has written a Public Art Master Plan for EC, so more art, especially ecoart, can be realized in the future, fulfilling the dream of a unique regional identity and a greener economy. *A Commonwealth of Kentucky 2005 Earth Day Award honored EC for promoting sustainability,*

*citing The Blue Line Trail and "Where Nature Meets Culture."*

**FUNDERS:** Creative Capital, Appalshop, KY Foundation for Women, Otis College of Art & Design, Pike County Tourism Board, EC residents and others.

WEBSITES: [www.SteinmanStudio.com](http://www.SteinmanStudio.com)

[www.SuzanneLacy.com](http://www.SuzanneLacy.com)

[www.greenart.net](http://www.greenart.net)

Susan Leibovitz Steinman's projects meld art, ecology and grassroots activism to revitalize blighted natural and cultural landscapes. She is editor/co-founder of *WEAD, Women Environmental Artists Directory*.

Suzanne Lacy is renowned for large-scale urban-issue public participatory performances and published writings on artists' roles in shaping public agenda. She is Chair of Fine Arts, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, CA.

## **Stormwater & Student Management Solutions with EcoArt**

**by Shelby Laubhan\***

Last year high school teacher Jill Coutts and I received a grant in the amount of \$10,000 to implement our proposed project entitled: *Creative Solutions to Stormwater Management: Creating an Outdoor Classroom and Community Commons through Rainscape Gardens and EcoArt*. Our goal is to raise student achievement through a [Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience](#) (MWEE) by involving students in authentic project based learning and original schoolyard habitat restoration. The project aims to mitigate runoff and erosion to local Chesapeake Bay tributaries through the creation of an interdisciplinary outdoor classroom and community commons area. This area will exhibit creative storm water management practices, including demonstration gardens and EcoArt as mediums of communication. The effort is highly collaborative between Northwood High School, community non-profits, governmental agencies and neighborhood stakeholders.

As a bit of background, Northwood High School – located in Montgomery County in Silver Spring (a neighboring city of the District of Columbia) – closed as a local school in 1985 due to population loss and demographic changes. Reopened in 2004, the school is located within an identified red zone, a designation reflecting many challenges, including an extremely high dropout rate (>30% of ninth-grade students do not go on to tenth-grade). Community revitalization is of the essence.

Because school yards contain some of the largest areas of impervious surfaces, they are a huge contributor to the problems associated with erosion. Through a well designed and decorated [Bayscaped](#) courtyard, engineered to slow storm water runoff, thousands of gallons of water discharged from the Northwood High School roof will be prevented from flowing into the local stream.

Different gardens within the courtyard will showcase distinct ecological/hydraulic purposes: a stormwater retaining bog; an edible rain garden; a roof-top garden; a composting and vermiculture area; a small tree nursery; and a native plant butterfly/bird garden with beneficial insects.

The gardens' planning, planting, and upkeep will be hands-on experience for students and community volunteers. Using CITY-green GIS technology (a mapping software program), students will map the courtyard and surrounding school grounds to determine what trees, shrubs and plantings will have the most significant benefit to the ecosystem. Students will determine Storm-water flow from off the roof and construction techniques for all structures. Students from science, mathematics, history and art courses will collaboratively design the landscaping of the gardens.

The gardens will not only service the local watershed through ecological functions but will also be aesthetically pleasing and educational. The gardens will be home to students' EcoArt creations and a performance area. EcoArt is the underscoring factor of the project's interdisciplinary and community involvement focus. While the creation of demonstration gardens give participants a physical involvement in watershed restoration efforts, the EcoArt element will provide both physical and intense emotional connection to Bay watershed issues, hence increasing environmental stewardship.

The relations explored through EcoArt at Northwood High will not only include the physical and biological pathways of Chesapeake Bay Watershed, but also the cultural, political and historical aspects of ecological systems. EcoArt projects come in all forms and media, and in this project the prime EcoArt endeavors will include, but not be limited to: demonstration garden signage, installations and sculptures made with a great variety of eco-friendly materials, mosaics, murals, and performances and speeches upon a stage area. Individual student EcoArt projects will be developed around Bay watershed themes and community issues – such as water quality, erosion control, buffer creation, groundwater protection, and pollution prevention.

The EcoArt theater component requires a small stage and seating area, to be integrated into the gardens' landscaping, and built with LEED standards, demonstrating its direct relation with environmental management and the courtyard's watershed restoration theme. The performance area will be a vital communication means both within and outside the school walls. It will be an outdoor classroom for not only theatre students, but also a public speaking forum for courses ranging from political science to literature. Because community groups and project partners will also have access to the performance area for their own venues, this mini "eco-theatre" is a major outreach component of the project. It will connect students and staff of every discipline, as well as community members, to the courtyard's existence and its message of watershed restoration.

This project aligns with state and local academic learning standards in multi-disciplines. The project will also be permanently implemented into the school's academic curricula. For instance, the biology and horticulture courses in the Environmental Sciences curriculum, the Student Leadership course within Political Science and Public Advocacy, the theatre and English courses in the Humanities and Film Academy, the cultural/historical research courses in the Gilder Lehrmand Academy of American History, and the painting, drawing and sculpting courses within the Art Department, will each profit from this schoolyard restoration project. In essence, every student in the school will participate in this sustainable project throughout the year and the years to come. Staff development will be an integral part too, as teachers continuously infuse Chesapeake Bay watershed studies within their curricular areas.

With such diversity, fostering a solid sense of community is not an easy thing to do. This project, aims to do just that – to act as an effective, strategic outreach force within the school and outside of the school. The revitalized courtyard will be a vital asset to Northwood High as a classroom and to the Northwood High community as a commons area. It will be a place to showcase. It aims to set a precedence.

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**Students were asked to craft an ephemeral piece out of organic materials located within a 5-foot radius of any chosen tree. Ninth-grader Matt adds his finishing touches on a piece influenced by Andy Goldsworthy.**

Artists, designers, and all types of creative folks are using their talent and intelligence to save our planet and create healthy cities. The concept of eco-art and eco-design is becoming more predominant within the creative community, and many e-dialogues and chat rooms are active with discourse of on-going projects that combine creative effort and ecological and sustainable thinking. Architects build with recycled materials, graphic designers find ways to reduce paper usage, product designers create biodegradable products, and artists make art that can purify water resources, nourish native habitats, and connect communities back to nature. Why has the creative community taken the lead in the effort to undo the devastation that our society has brought not only to the earth but to its own humanity? There are probably a variety of answers to this question, both personal and professional, but a primary reason has to be that creative people found that they can make a difference and that they can make decisions that will positively influence the battle between public good and private gain. The creative community has always been an activist voice and has championed causes for the oppressed and wronged. From war protest posters to political satire cartoons, we have used creative ingenuity to make our opinions known. And now we have brought these same creative forces into the fight for environmental stewardship and eco-justice. Artists and designers are educating themselves about ecosystems, bioengineering, corporate injustice and a myriad of other critical world issues – all in an attempt to bring their creative spirit and prowess into positions of power and influence. They are making constructive contributions toward educating their local community about the connection between its collective behavior and the impact of its ecological footprint. I am proud to be part of this group of emerging eco-creatives. As an ecological designer and founder of a design studio doing work in CA and NYC urban environments, I am concerned with the types of projects my creative firm undertakes. I have always said ‘I want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem!’

**from a creek to a ditch...**

**The Rancho Years** This land became part of Rancho San Pablo in 1823, awarded by the Mexican government to Francisco Castro for his service in the army. Ranging from Cerrito Creek in southern El Cerrito, north to Pinole, and east to El Sobrante and Lafayette, the Rancho's 17,000 acres were primarily used for grazing cattle, which were watered in local creeks. By the late 1800s, European settlers had moved in and taken over the Castro's land. They, too, grazed cattle here, and later on, many dairy farms operated in the area. In the mid-1900s, locals may have called the stream "Bishop Creek." In maps of Rancho San Pablo, the creek flows through Thomas Bishop's land, roughly bounded by today's Arlington Boulevard, Macdonald Avenue, and Pitkin Avenue.

**Railroad Days** During the late 1800s, the California & Nevada Railroad — a narrow-gauge line with a wood-burning locomotive — laid tracks through this site and straightened and relocated the creek. The railroad was purchased by Santa Fe Railroad in 1876, later becoming the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, which ran trains through the area until the mid-1970s.

**A Creek Reborn** After the railroad abandoned its line, this site sat dormant for several decades. In the early 1990s, proposals to develop it with an auto supply shop, a parking lot, and a grocery store were met with protests by El Cerrito and Richmond residents. They had a vision for what the site could be: a restored creek and a natural park.

**Prehistory** No one knows exactly what this area looked like in pristine condition, but we do know that Native Americans lived here as early as 2,500 years ago. Expert hunters and gatherers, Ohlones of the Huchma clan probably drank from the creek and used its clear, spring-fed waters to leech tannin from acorns in Canyon Trail Park, Mira Vista Park, and elsewhere in the watershed.

**19th-century map shows how the Rancho San Pablo area and its smaller parcels fit across from the United States and Mexico.**

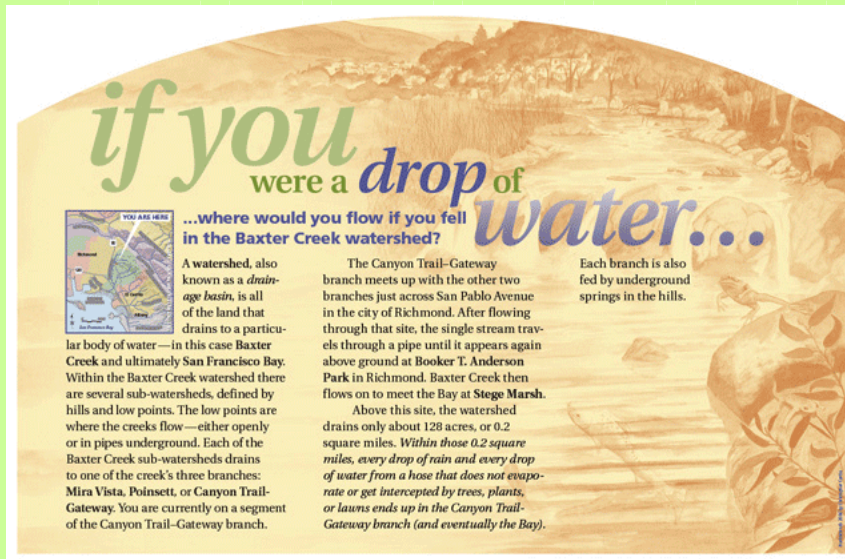
**The creek flows through Rancho San Pablo.**

**Baxter Creek Gateway Park (to form the park) before restoration (February 2009). Restored creekbed runs down to beach.**

**The Mello family dairy farm in El Cerrito (1921).**

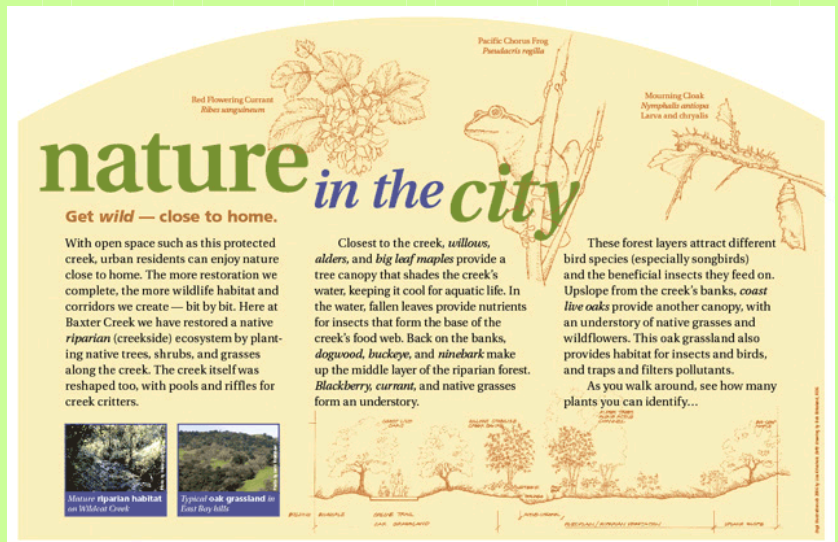
**The Santa Fe Railroad's Central Union Creek locomotive.**

Recently we have had the opportunity to work with an organization called 'Friends of Baxter Creek' (FOBC), located in El Cerrito CA. In 1997 a small group of residents banded together to prevent a large retail chain store from building over a small creek that flowed through neighborhood parks. And even though some residents thought the 'creek was a ditch', this group was relentless in its fight to save Baxter Creek. Growing to a membership of over 900, FOBC succeeded in its struggle, and over the past year has restored the creek, its native plants and habitats, and created a beautiful community open space and park. But they also envisioned this park as more than a recreational site – they wanted to it to be a workshop for educational outreach about nature, watersheds, and ecological commitment. Working with FOBC and the City of El Cerrito, our design studio's contribution has been the information and graphic design for four interpretive panels scattered throughout the site and a community kiosk, telling the history of the site, and the story behind the new park's creation – how the community saved the creek and raised funds for the development of the park.



Topics for the four interpretive panels include content on 'what is a watershed', the 'importance of urban parks', 'documentation on the creek's restoration', and 'maintaining clean water resources'. Illustrations of native plants and animals surrounding the creek area have been integrated into all of the panels. An illustration of an ecosystem shows visually the connection between 'people and water'. A founding member of the FOBC wrote copy for the panels and two local artists, dedicated to ecology, were commissioned to do the illustrations. Another significant component

to this successful community effort was the commitment by the city of El Cerrito and local environmental agencies to fund the creek restoration and hire a landscaping firm specializing and knowledgeable about the critical balance between human environments and nature. Without this combined effort of environmentally minded citizens, enlightened city management, and designers and artists engaged in ecological work, this creek might have been buried under tons of asphalt, as has been the fate of so many other creeks. And the community would have lost one of its most valuable assets. Ongoing workshops about the watershed and native habitats will be held at the park as well as art classes engaging nature. A bike path connects joining towns and runs the length of the site, encouraging the community and neighbors to get out of their cars and walk or bike to work, shopping, and entertainment destinations. To read more about FOBC or the Baxter Creek Gateway Park restoration project, please visit their website at [www.creativedifferences.com/baxtercreek](http://www.creativedifferences.com/baxtercreek).



Sue Labouvie is Founder and President of Studio L'Image ([www.studiolimage.com](http://www.studiolimage.com)) an information and environmental graphics design studio, and Co-Founder of 'Landscape Art and Design' (LAND) an online journal reflecting the work of eco-artists and eco-designers ([www.landviews.org](http://www.landviews.org)).

Credits: Illustration for 'creek to ditch' & 'nature in the city' panels: Lisa Krieschok ([www.krieschok.com](http://www.krieschok.com)). Illustration for 'watershed' panel: Christopher Castle ([animamundi@jps.net](mailto:animamundi@jps.net)) Copywriting: Lisa Owens Viani and Melanie Mintz, Landscape Architects: Restoration Design Group, Berkeley CA FOBC Co-Founders: Maryann Aberg and Lisa Owens Viani



ACN is co-sponsoring the 50th anniversary conference of the International Society for the Systems Sciences. This interdisciplinary conference offers an opportunity to celebrate a half-century of theory and practice in the broadly defined field of systems and recognizing the contributions of leading systems thinkers. It is also a time to reflect upon what we have learned, and to collaboratively envision future directions. With the first woman president being Margaret Mead, ISSS was initially founded to bring together scholars from a broad range of disciplines, to explore common patterns of organization in different kinds of systems. Over time it has evolved to incorporate methodologies for problem solving in complex systems. During the past fifty years, the field of systems research has exploded into a myriad of specialized fields and schools of thought, from complexity to collaborative design. The purpose of the Sonoma 2006 conference is to foster communication and collaboration between systems thinkers from these various traditions.

Under the general theme of Complexity, Democracy and Sustainability, the conference will address such questions as:

- \* What can the sciences of complexity teach us about social justice and sustainability?
- \* What is the nature of the relationship between information and consciousness?
- \* How do we manage information in a way that fosters effective decision-making processes?
- \* How do we nurture organizational structures that serve human needs while also protecting our resources for future generations?

Art and science collaborations are integral to ISSS. Arts-based Inquiry is a new Special Integration Group. ACN member, Tiffany von Emmel, and Dreamfish art collective will facilitate Dreamscape, a community arts project, as an integrated part of the conference design. With the intent of dreaming a future for the planet, an interactive installation will evolve and culminate in the conference closing, a participatory performance event which invites the hundreds of participants into an improvisational jam of sound, gesture, sculpture and movement.

Two organizations will also be holding their annual meeting in conjunction with the ISSS conference:

- \* American Society for Cybernetics
- \* International Conference on Systems Thinking in Management (ICSTM2006)

Along with Art Culture Nature, other organizations that will be represented include the System Dynamics Group, the Santa Fe Institute, the New England Complex Systems Institute, the Institute for Intercultural Studies, the General Evolution Research Group, the Ackoff Center for Advancement of Systems Approaches (ACASA), and the Center for Organizational Dynamics (University of Pennsylvania), among many others. For more information: [www.iss.org](http://www.iss.org)