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LAND ART Living Truths

A performance artist-turned-educator sheds light on the Islais Creek

Zahid Sardar

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Artist Bonnie Sherk scatters ideas, like seeds over unyielding concrete, until they break ground.

Her latest project, A Living Library, is one in a series of landscape art experiments over many decades that link environment to culture. Her projects in the Mission, Bernal Heights, Glen Park and the Excelsior, often conducted under San Francisco freeways or on traffic islands, led her inexorably to Islais Creek, long hidden under asphalt and concrete.

"I realized that the roadways where I used to perform were part of a watershed and the creek that flowed in the valley was directly under the 280 freeway," says Sherk. She scoured old maps and learned that much of it was agricultural land because of its proximity to water -- water that is now the bane of homeowners whose basements, built over the creek bed, get flooded every winter.

"People built in the Islais floodplain because they didn't understand," says Sherk. "They needed to use the riparian opportunities in a better way."

"Systemic design means you create places that allow whole, positive experiences," she says. Sherk set about to create interactive programs she could interject into a physical place. She decided to advocate city parks planted with native flora on traffic islands and other streetscapes. Wherever possible, she hoped to excavate sites to "daylight" creeks such as Islais, which flows east from Glen Park, down Cesar Chavez to the bay. This library of environmental history would enable even casual observers to understand this watery habitat.

Back in the day, Sherk, a fearless -- some might say possessed -- artist, experimented with sit-ins to make political or environmental points. In a flooded dump beside a freeway, she sat in a stuffed armchair, dressed in formal clothes, while drivers, oblivious to the unnatural landscape, whizzed by. Another time, for "Public Lunch" at the San Francisco Zoo, she sat down to an elegant meal in a cage beside lions, inviting uncomfortable "feeding-time" parallels. Her companion, a lab rat, lounged in a wire cage beside her.

In 1974, she launched the Farm, 7 acres of traffic islands and intersections under freeways all transformed into an eco garden/art space replete with domesticated but messy animals. After 1980,

this working farm was absorbed as a public park.

That experiment probably informs Sherk's Living Library gardens, which she envisions all over the Bay Area, the country and eventually the world. So far, besides the two in San Francisco, she is planting one in Roosevelt Island, New York.

"Everything and everyone is one organism," says Sherk, reiterating her holistic theory of landscaping. "A 'branch library' garden in Punjab, India, would be different and unique but also part of a larger whole," she says.

James Denman Middle and Balboa High schools and San Miguel Child Development Center's 9 acres of land in the Excelsior district is bordered by Oceanview, Merced and the Ingleside (OMI). This treeless area was once a fertile valley occupied by Muwekma Indians and historic farms. Sherk wants to reverse some of its present-day desolation with her Living Library plan.

"For students, such a library is the way to understand history but also math, science, geography and politics," says Sherk, who, in 2000 spearheaded the planting of 200 native street trees alongside the schools, and, between Denman and San Miguel schools, a vegetable and flower garden. Sherk's nonprofit corporation Life Frames Inc., in concert with city organizations, attracted funds from philanthropic groups like Friends of the Urban Forest, the Ford Foundation and the San Francisco Foundation to help with the master plan and the actual planting.

After opening the OMI/Excelsior Living Library & Think Park, Sherk planted one more library at the Junipero Serra child development annex near Holly Park in Bernal Heights.

"It is now part of the school curriculum," says Kathleen Truett, who manages the site at Junipero Serra and involves each student in the gardening game. Some day, digital kiosks at library locations will allow viewers at one garden to compare the effects of ecological diversity all over the globe. Until then, artful placards by students that sport such names as Coyote Brush, California Coast Live Oak, Tree Mallow or Western Redwood, function as the street-side database. At nearby Lick-Wilmerding High, students have no garden of their own but are drawn to this one. In exchange, one student, Melissa Fan, created an Islais Creek mosaic panel in their workshops, and Sherk is encouraging more collaboration, dreaming of such things as garden benches and trellises.

"Education is an ecological system," Sherk likes to say, and so her gardens will illuminate the ecological past, present and future of places. In her holistic view of time and place, only when we rediscover what the past societies knew will we be able to pass on their collective wisdom.

As we drive around the Excelsior, Sherk looks at the rolling, treeless streetscape. "Geneva Avenue could be a riparian habitat," she says. "Its sensuous landscape has been made so barren," she says. "Cayuga Avenue is certainly the low point where another creek bed is. Native plantings will attract native birds, too. "

As we turn a corner, she points to a stand of poplars bordering a playing field. "There's water under there!" she says triumphantly. "We could dig for it."

Zahid Sardar is The Chronicle design editor. E-mail him at zsardar@sfchronicle.com.

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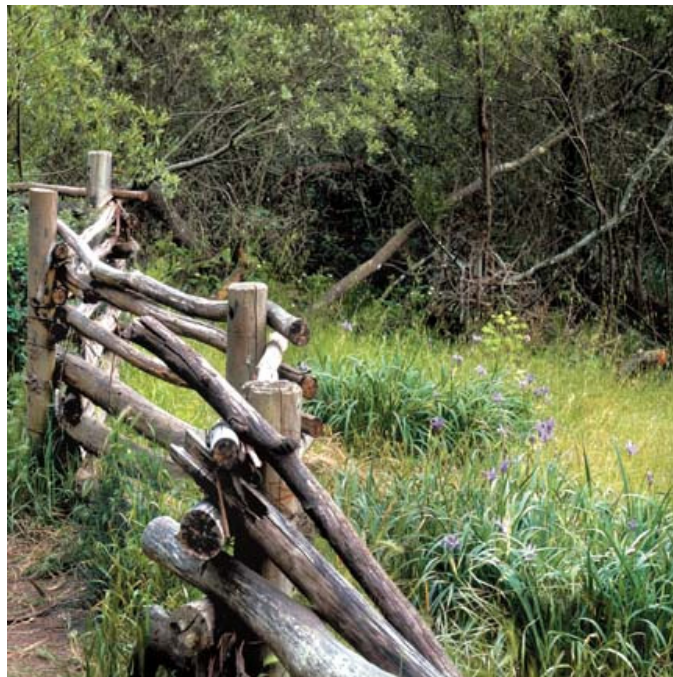
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Glen Park Canyon is a showcase wilderness that few in San Francisco know. It thrives on the Islais Creek, which starts there as a winter rivulet and is redirected into storm drains at the edge of the park. Formerly, it flowed into the Mission, where Native Americans farmed the land. Later settlers sullied the creek with waste and debris that had to be covered over. Photo by Marion Brenner



Marion Brenner

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Bonnie Sherk tends to a Living Library garden on a 9-acre plot of land shared with three public schools. The garden educates students about Islais Creek, its natural and political history and the ecosystem that fed the native Muwekma tribe. Mosaic murals depict the creek. Sherk has planned a string of native gardens for schools and on sidewalks that lead to the creek. Photo by Marion Brenner



Marion Brenner

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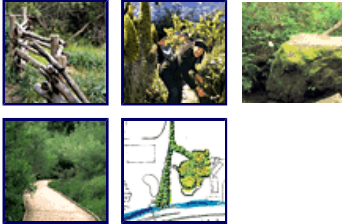
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Islais Creek in Glen Park Canyon nature preserve meanders under a boardwalk. Photo by Marion Brenner



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