THE SPIRIT OF STONE

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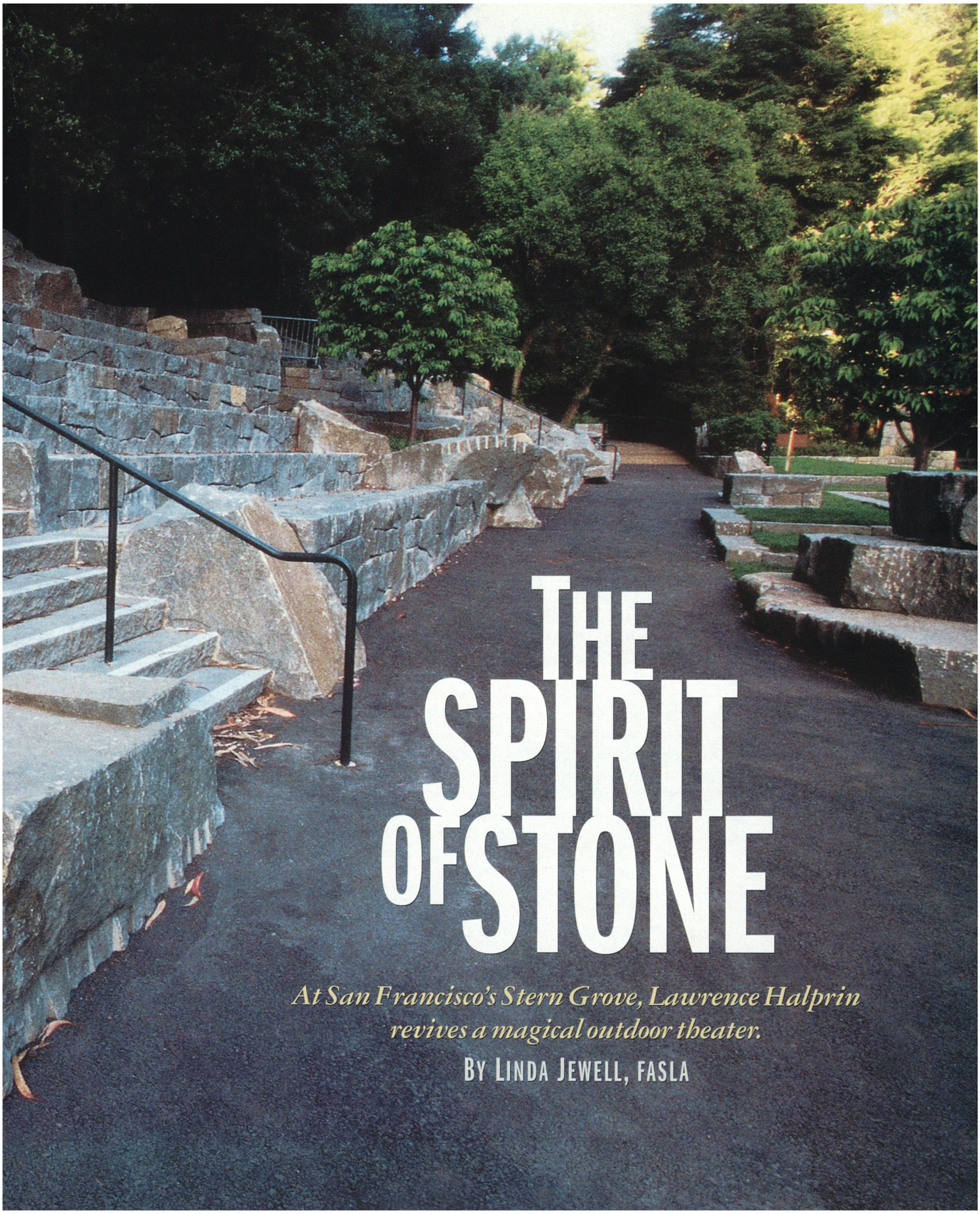
Source: *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, FEBRUARY 2006, Vol. 96, No. 2 (FEBRUARY 2006), pp. 78-87

Published by: American Society of Landscape Architects

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44681233



THE SPIRIT OF STONE

At San Francisco's Stern Grove, Lawrence Halprin revives a magical outdoor theater.

By Linda Jewell, FASLA

"TO CREATE A MYSTICAL PLACE where one would be inspired to reach into oneself" was the intent of Lawrence Halprin, FASLA, in his design for San Francisco's Stern Grove Rhoda Goldman Concert Meadow. Calling upon a reiterative and collaborative design process, Halprin has woven a magical landscape experience into the everyday lives of thousands, and he has done so within the constraints of contemporary codes and the strenuous public review of a city-owned landscape. This new outdoor theater was constructed through a $15 million gift to the city of San Francisco and opened in June 2005 in San Francisco's Sunset District.

Halprin achieved his goal by artfully inserting a stage, grand stone bleachers, grass terraces, stone ziggurats, and 175 granite boulders into a half-mile-long

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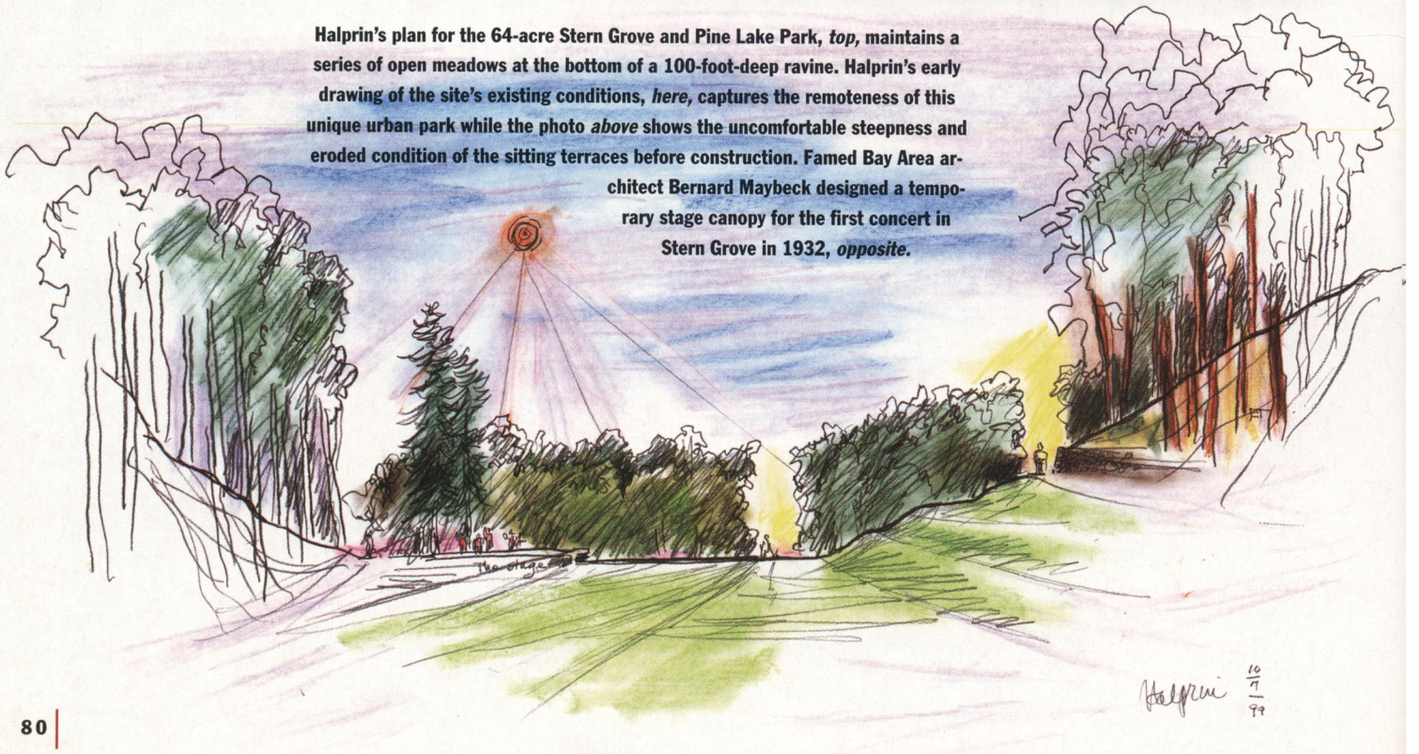

Halprin's plan for the 64-acre Stern Grove and Pine Lake Park, *top*, maintains a series of open meadows at the bottom of a 100-foot-deep ravine. Halprin's early drawing of the site's existing conditions, *here*, captures the remoteness of this unique urban park while the photo *above* shows the uncomfortable steepness and eroded condition of the sitting terraces before construction. Famed Bay Area architect Bernard Maybeck designed a temporary stage canopy for the first concert in Stern Grove in 1932, *opposite*.

ravine that has been a city park for more than 70 years. Halprin recalls his first visit to the grove in the 1950s when he came to watch his wife, Anna, dance. "Even then, it was kind of a mess, with a terrible setup for the backstage. And the people sitting on the slope would slide down to the bottom." Nearly 50 years later, Halprin attended a concert at the invitation of Doug Goldman, president of the Stern Grove Festival Association (SGFA) and great grandson of Rosalie Stern, who turned the property into a public park. While discussing the theater's condition with Doug's father, Richard Goldman, Halprin sketched a concept for a possible theater scheme on a cardboard lunch box. The three men left the concert agreeing that the SGFA must address Stern Grove's deteriorating conditions if it was to continue to serve large audiences and preserve the natural setting.

In 2001, SGFA retained Halprin's firm to determine a conceptual direction for the theater. Concept in hand, Doug Goldman approached the city with a proposal that the SGFA raise funds for a new theater. The Recreation and Park Department was intrigued but had already identified the entire park landscape—the 31-acre Stern Grove and the adjacent 33-acre Pine Lake Park—as a site in need of a landscape improvement plan. With a donation from the SGFA, Halprin began a plan for the entire 64 acres that included a design for a new theater space, to be named the Rhoda Goldman Concert Meadow after Rosalie Stern's granddaughter.

Judi Mosqueda, a landscape architect with San Francisco's Department of Public Works, began working with Halprin and the SGFA on a series of public workshops. A vociferous group of neighbors and advocates for off-leash dogs attended the early workshops with objections to any changes to the park. After assurances that off-leash dogs could occupy designated areas and that the concert space would remain the same size and unfenced, the tone changed, and neighbors provided positive input on how the park could serve both the large concert venues and the neighborhood. The improvement plan, published in 2003, identified six phases of needed improvements totaling nearly $37 million. The SGFA immediately began raising $15 million for the concert meadow and attendant areas and established an ambitious schedule. With design work starting in the winter of 2004, the goal was to complete design, construction drawings, city review, and construction of the new theater in time for a June 2005 concert. Fortunately, the project's private funding allowed the SGFA to negotiate with contractors and avoid the lengthy process of competitive bidding normally required on public projects.

Halprin immediately set into motion a version of his RSVP Cycle, a repetitive, nonsequential cycle of four design steps: Resources—examining what you have to work with, including

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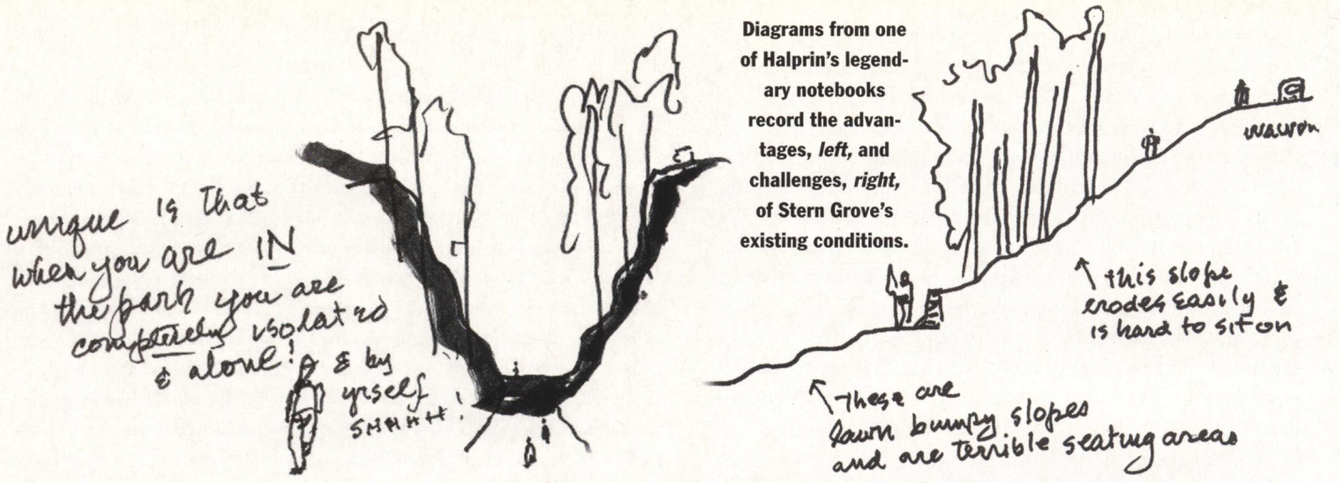
Stern Grove's Early Years

ONCE SURROUNDED by coastal dunes, the park floor of Stern Grove contains one of San Francisco's three natural ponds and a series of meadows that lie as much as 100 feet below the surrounding residential streets. San Franciscans have used this site for recreational entertainment since the 1890s when Alvin Green, a colorful entrepreneur, transformed the treeless landscape into a "suburban resort." Green built a deer park, a boating pavilion, a trout farm, a beer garden, and an inn along the valley and planted hundreds of eucalyptus on the side slopes. Today these plantings provide protection from the city's wind and fog, creating temperatures warmer in the park than in the neighborhoods above. Green's resort declined in popularity after 1910, but sporadic public use continued until 1931 when Rosalie Stern purchased the eastern portion of the property, known as The Grove, for a public park in memory of her husband, Sigmund Stern. Rosalie Stern, a supporter of the playground and recreation movement, began a decades-long commitment to expanding the park property to provide both recreation and free concerts for the citizens of San Francisco.

Rosalie Stern admired the serenity of The Grove because its topographic remoteness allowed visitors to escape the turmoil of urban life by descending into a wooded glen where the activities of the streets above virtually disappear. Consequently, she directed the park designers, including noted architect Bernard Maybeck, to develop the park with as few structural changes as possible. They complied by proposing little more than subtle paths and low granite walls built by the Works Progress Administration. Finding the site's natural acoustics to be excellent, Stern began planning the first concert for June 19, 1932. The improvements were simple: Maybeck designed a temporary fabric canopy for a raised stage at the base of the southern slope, and portable chairs were aligned along the length of the meadow.

In 1938, Stern formed the Stern Grove Festival Association (SGFA) to raise funds for free summer concerts. She led the SGFA until her death in 1956, when its leadership passed to her daughter, then to her granddaughter, and eventually to her great grandson. The SGFA continued to raise funds sufficient to support free, Sunday-afternoon summer performances that have included such nationally renowned artists as Isaac Stern, Arthur Fiedler, and Carlos Santana as well as the San Francisco Symphony, Opera, and Ballet. By the 1990s, some Stern Grove events were attracting more than 10,000 people, but the park had had few improvements since the 1950s, when the city built a modest backstage area and a steep earthen slope for sitting. Consequently, preparation for concerts was difficult and expensive. Hundreds of portable seats needed placement, exit aisles had to be roped off, and temporary barrier-free access had to be set in place. The rudimentary stage required time-consuming readjustment of each performer's equipment and the cumbersome installation of a canopy to protect the musicians' instruments from the sun. The limited number of seats meant that thousands of spectators sought precarious perches on the steep slopes, causing soil erosion and damage to the trees.



Diagrams from one of Halprin's legendary notebooks record the advantages, *left,* and challenges, *right,* of Stern Grove's existing conditions.

both human and material resources; Scoring—describing and making a design process visible to all participants; Valuaction—analyzing and acting; and Performance—the result of the design score. This cycle is described further in *RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment,* Halprin's 1969 book. Although the specifics of the RSVP Cycle can seem brilliantly understandable one minute and obscure the next, the underlying message is quite clear: Design should be a collaborative, open-ended, and reiterative process that pursues an idea rather than a predetermined form. At Stern Grove, the idea, prompted by Halprin's memories of walking through ancient Greek theaters, was for visitors to inhabit a sculpture of stone such that stone's primordial, timeless character would inspire each person to examine his or her spiritual connection to the Earth and its life forms.

Committed to building the theater in stone, Halprin's office began studying models of prototypical rows of 3-foot-deep stone seats interspersed with rugged boulders. These boulders, although sculptural, also functioned as unobtrusive points to incrementally step the bleacher rows down the valley's natural 2.5 percent longitudinal slope. Smaller boulders also provided an ingenious solution for a safe and graceful transition from the 18-inch-high seats to the three adjacent risers of the access stairs. But creating artistic arrangements of the boulders while solving these pragmatic problems would require that the boulders be precisely selected, arranged, and installed. Additionally, the scheme included several sculptural stone ziggurats that reference the mystical qualities of the stone monuments of prehistoric cultures.

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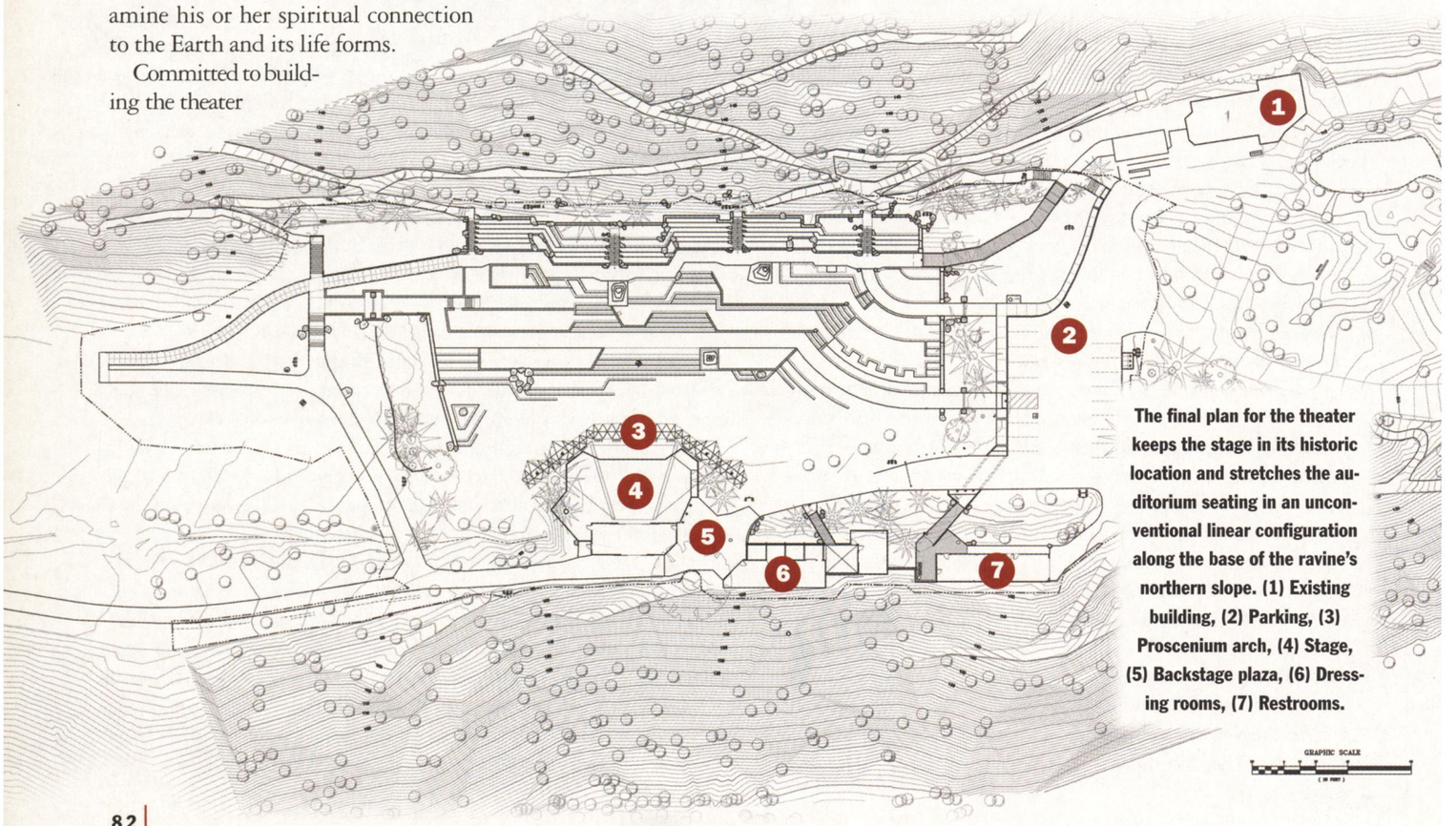

The final plan for the theater keeps the stage in its historic location and stretches the auditorium seating in an unconventional linear configuration along the base of the ravine's northern slope. (1) Existing building, (2) Parking, (3) Proscenium arch, (4) Stage, (5) Backstage plaza, (6) Dressing rooms, (7) Restrooms.

Halprin showed the study model to Edward Westbrook of QuarryHouse, a San Anselmo, California, stone masonry contractor, and asked him to find a stone that matched the park's historic walls to use in both the seat walls and the boulders. Westbrook, who has a 25-year history of working with Halprin, might be described as a "stone entrepreneur" who routinely hunts for the right stone in old fields, quarries, and abandoned structures—rather than relying only on suppliers for stone. He then determines a construction system that meets applicable codes and oversees the stone's fabrication and installation. Unfortunately there was no reliable North American stone source that could provide the quantity, color, and character that the Stern project needed. But on a trip to Shandong Province in China, Westbrook spotted a granite quarry and brought back photos, samples, and approximate costs for Halprin, who immediately approved the selection.

***Above,* Halprin's office generated numerous study models as it investigated how to maximize the number and type of seats while maintaining an open feel to the meadow. Halprin visited the site several times each week to work with the masons on stone placement, *below*.**

Halprin investigated numerous seating layouts as the scheme evolved. Rather than remold the landscape into the semicircle of the classical theaters or the fan shape of a contemporary one, he pursued an unusual linear configuration. The scheme retains the stage in its historic location at the foot of the south slope, preserves the vegetation on all four edges of the concert meadow, and stretches a 400-foot-long bank of bleacher seating along the base of the ravine's northern hillside. The new backstage building, dressing rooms, greenroom, and restrooms are tucked into the southern hillside, mostly hidden behind vegetation. A metal structure, with the branching forms of a tree, frames the stage while supporting lighting, sound equipment, and a removable sailcloth canopy. In front of the densely packed bank of 6,000 bleacher seats, curbed grass terraces gradually transition into the meadow. By confining the stepped seating and staircases—and their attendant ADA-compliant handrails—to the steep bleachers, the scheme avoids obtrusive structures jutting into the meadow.

As the design evolved in response to reviews by the clients and code officials, a constant exchange of information between Halprin's office and QuarryHouse provided budgetary and technical input for design decisions. Using only a rough schematic, QuarryHouse had the quarry cut the stone for a full-scale mock-up of a typical bleacher section and shipped the dismantled pieces to California for reassembly. After substantial field modifications of the mock-up, revised costs determined the linear feet of stone seating that could be built. Meanwhile, Halprin's staff produced clay models of the large stone ziggurats and drawings of prototypical boulders to provide images for quarry workers to tag, number, and photograph 300 boulders similar to these drawings. With numbered images of the tagged stones, Halprin's staff selected 175 boulders and located each by number on the construction drawings. Once the basic bleacher dimensions were established, the quarry began fabrication and shipped 80 percent of the stone even before the construction drawings were complete, enabling construction to begin in September 2004.

Halprin's flexible, open-ended process tapped the creative energies of all participants to strengthen his vision. Everyone involved—benefactor, client, staff members, city officials, contractor, and masons—felt that he or she had made a creative contribution to a fantastic project. Halprin and his staff were good listeners and included everyone's expertise as a resource to be recycled and re-scored with

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drawings, models, and dialogue, allowing the new information to give shape to the vision. But Halprin never responded to a request with simple compliance; he found a way to incorporate each comment into the vision that he passionately defended, using his fantastic sketches and poetic words to convince all interested parties to be flexible in their thinking.

But design decisions were by no means finished when the final construction drawings left Halprin's office in September and the general contractor began moving earth. The stair treads and other repetitive pieces were cut in China, but the final cuts and decisions on the boulder placement and ziggurat construction and the precise joint patterns of the walls were made on site. Throughout the nine months of construction, both Halprin and his project landscape architect, Andrew Sullivan, visited the site several times a week to fine-tune the stonework with QuarryHouse's project manager, David Elkington, and field superintendent Jason Joplin. Halprin critiqued the construction of the walls and bleachers, insisting that joints follow a discontinuous zigzag across the seat wall's elevations and that the variably sized stones maintain a crisp horizontal line along the top. But it was the installation of the sculptural ziggurats and boulders that demanded the most diligent on-site critiques. After the designer and builder had worked together for many days on the final placement of the two- to nine-ton boulders, their roles became blurred, as Joplin, a sculptor as well as a mason, developed a bond with Halprin and Sullivan in their common

The curved terraces at the eastern end depart from the linear gesture of the bleachers to provide a direct view of the stage, *left*. Even when filled with a concert's traditional lawn chairs and picnic tables, *below*, the space keeps its sense of seclusion and long views through the linear meadow intact.

PEG SKORPINSKI, BOTH

At last June's inaugural concert, an estimated 13,000 people covered the meadow, bleachers, and adjacent park lawns while surrounded by vegetation and earthen slopes.

PEG SKORPINSKI

search for poetic stone compositions. Throughout one of San Francisco's rainiest winters, they, along with 30 masons, worked in the mud and rain to complete the stonework by May so that the entire site could be ready for a concert on June 19, 2005.

The preopening reviews of the theater were glowing, and an estimated 13,000 people attended the inaugural concert, covering the bleachers, ziggurats, boulders, terraces, concert meadow, and even distant lawns.

The performance meadow works equally well during the 355 nonconcert days. The dog walking and jogging have returned, but now families and construction workers eat lunches on the sunny stone seats, children climb the ziggurats, and lovers snuggle between boulders. The space is even bringing the city new revenue from rentals for weddings and corporate gatherings. Although everyone is happy with how the theater functions, the greatest praise has been for the evocative space, particularly for the views looking toward the horizontal sweep of stone seats. This exuberant display of stone bleachers, boulders, and ziggurats is an unexpectedly monumental gesture to discover in a quiet public park. Yet the prevailing ambience is one of a sensual, womblike embrace by the mature vegetation and green lawns. One performer described the descent to the stage as a fantastic trip into Middle Earth, where surrounded by stone, soil, and vegetation, one is compelled to gaze upward at the soaring tree trunks and at the sky above.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, outdoor theaters have been inherently remarkable landscapes. Not only do they mark the land with a durable record of grand public gatherings, but they also place visitors in a uniquely intimate relationship with the earth and sky, focusing their attention on the landscape. In preparation for a book on American outdoor theaters, I found hundreds of theaters built before 1950 where this intimate relationship with the landscape inspires reflection, but I have seen very few post-1940s American theaters that prompt visitors to even notice the landscape. It is easy to attribute the difference to the demands of contemporary codes and public review, but Stern Grove is a public landscape in a city known for rigorous review. So what methods did Halprin use to create a theater that elicits such positive and passionate reactions from a diverse and demanding community?

First, he began his design by looking to the great Greek theaters as models for what a theater can "do and be" rather than replicating their geometry. He sought to capture the sensation of being inside the classical theaters—surrounded by ancient stones that are anchored in the earth while also reaching toward the sky. The stone used for the seats references the timelessness

of its precedents, thereby memorializing Stern Grove's 70 years of concerts. Today many designers choose stone to convey timelessness, but the results are often awkward boulders lying on turf or oddly detailed veneer walls. Here, as in the classical theaters, the careful selection and placement of each stone tells the visitor that human hands and minds have considered color, shape, and texture in the search for each stone's proper place in the landscape. The connection of these aeons-old objects with human decisions about where they are to rest imparts a mystical quality to this place that connects it with the spiritual aspirations of the ancient theater builders.

Second, the design is a bold, deliberate intervention that responds to the particulars of this landscape. The introduction of 2,000 tons of imported stone into a coastal ravine is an unapologetic move that cannot be overlooked. Like Stonehenge, Avebury, the Great Pyramids, or the Greek theaters, the Stern Theater calls attention to the existing landscape through contrast rather than mimicry or integration. Yet, its form was shaped by

Curbed lawn terraces, *here,* accommodate various types of flexible seating and provide a gradual descent onto the meadow floor. Throughout the site, irregular stonework contrasts with precise linear edges. Halprin, *inset,* looks over the meadow from one of the many human-scaled perches among the stones.

PEG SKORPINSKI

the natural patterns of the site; almost no vegetation was removed, the drainage pattern was maintained, and the theater adjusted its shape to the valley rather than contort the valley to it. By taking cues from the site, this scheme sets itself apart from many of Halprin's urban projects where their imagery is based on nature's rugged power. Here, the trees, meadow, and green terraces more clearly focus on the sensual, life-giving qualities of nature.

Third, the scheme's abstracted spatial vocabulary had the flexibility to adjust to a range of conditions. Some critics might dismiss Stern Grove as a Modernist piece, and it is true that its formal composition relies on the abstractions of natural patterns typical of Halprin's 60 years of work. But because Halprin's approach is based on a flexible process rather than graphic pattern, each new situation redefines his formal organizational system. Like Freeway Park, Ira's Fountain, and the FDR Memorial, here Halprin bases the scheme's geometry on a rectilinear system that allows unexpected deviations. The masonry pattern on Stern Grove's walls offers a graphic explanation of his organization of the entire site. The parallel lines of the flat tops of the seats establish a rectilinearity, but the zigzagging joints provide a deliberate, although seemingly random, departure from this system. Likewise, Stern Grove's plan establishes its datum with long parallel lines of seats, but protruding terraces, assemblages of boulders, angled walls, and scattered trees periodically interrupt the regularity of the rows, creating delightful spots to sit, look, and think.

But the key to Stern Grove's success goes beyond Halprin's physical design decisions on the seats, terraces, and stones that create a functioning theater. It also lies in the reiterative and open-ended process that included builders, bureaucrats, and benefactors in the evolution of a new theater. The interests of these parties varied, yet each one became an enthusiastic ally and advocate for Halprin's vision. In Halprin's words, "it was a happy project," and that happiness has created a magical landscape. LAM

Linda Jewell, FASLA, is a professor of landscape architecture and environmental planning at UC Berkeley and a consulting design partner at Freeman & Jewell, Berkeley, California, and Reynolds and Jewell, Raleigh, North Carolina.

PROJECT CREDITS **Client:** Stern Grove Festival Association (Corrina Marshal, executive director; Peter Palermo, project manager); San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (Elizabeth Goldstein, general manager; Judi Mosqueda, project manager). **Master planner and designer:** Office of Lawrence Halprin (Lawrence Halprin, FASLA, overall design; Paul Scardina, FASLA, principal in charge; Andrew Sullivan, project manager). **Architect of record:** Hamilton + Aitken Architects (Chad Hamilton). **Associate architect:** Edmund Burger Architects (Ed Burger). **ADA consultants:** Moore, Iacofano, Goltzman, Inc. **Stage cover consultant:** Pineapple Sails (Kame Richards). **Theater/acoustical consultant:** Auerbach Pollack Friedlander. **Structural engineer:** GFDR Engineers. **Geotechnical engineers:** Miller Pacific Engineering Group. **Lighting consultant:** Patrick B. Quigley & Associates. **Consulting arborist:** James MacNair & Associates. **MEP consultants:** MHC Mechanical Engineers; C&N Engineers (electrical). **Civil engineers:** Nolte & Associates, Inc. **Cost consultant:** Davis Langdon. **Construction manager:** Conversion Management Associates, Inc. **General contractor:** Vance Brown Builders. **Stone masons:** QuarryHouse, Inc. (Edward Westbrook, CEO; David Elkington, project manager; Jason Joplin, field superintendent).