

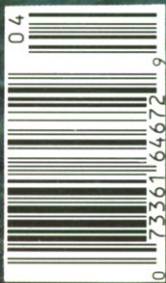
SEVEN DOLLARS

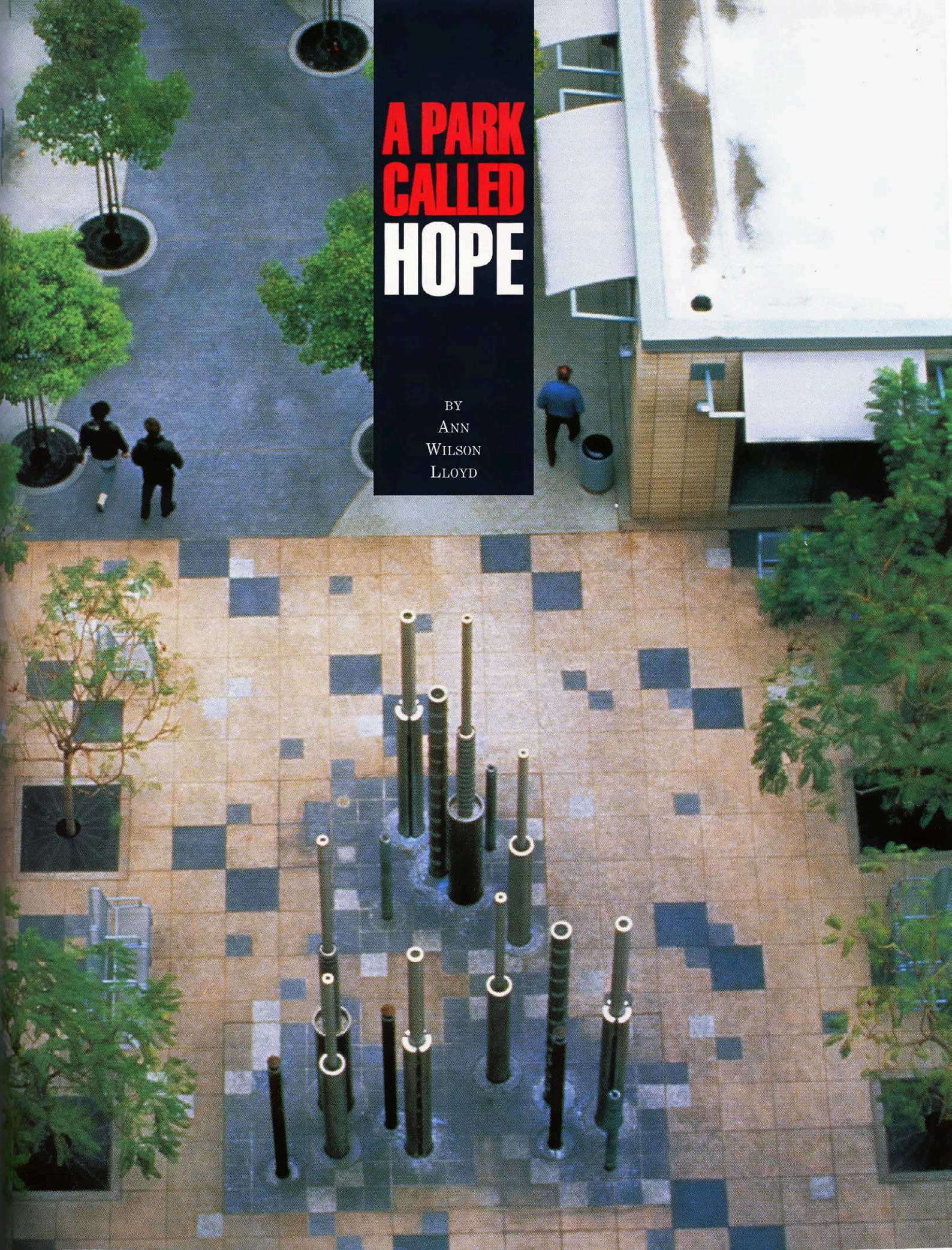
APRIL 1993

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



**PARKS
BEYOND
OLMSTED**



An aerial photograph of a modern courtyard. In the center is a large sculpture made of numerous vertical, cylindrical poles of varying heights, some with rings at the top. The ground is paved with large, light-colored square tiles, interspersed with smaller, darker square tiles in a grid-like pattern. To the left, there are several young trees planted in circular pits. To the right, a modern building with large windows and a white awning is visible. A person is walking near the building. The overall scene is a blend of nature and modern architecture.

A PARK CALLED HOPE

BY
ANN
WILSON
LLOYD

Overleaf: Eino's fountain expresses L.A. themes *sans* water accumulation "to drink, bathe in or slip on." Below: Plan connects downtown areas.

Dedicated to a former slave, nurse and midwife, Biddy Mason Park sits atop Mason's 19th-century homestead, which was also a clinic for the sick and refuge for poor black families. The pocket park in downtown Los Angeles includes a fountain and public art based on Mason's life. It illustrates how, as cities become more complex, designers can address issues of culture, ecology and even myth within small urban spaces.

Practically, Biddy Mason's 7,000 square feet provide a walkway between Broadway and Spring Street, a dense area bordered by Latino shopping districts and new state office buildings. It is anchored by Broadway Spring Center, a shopping, café and parking-garage complex. Though public space developed under the city's Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), the park is privately managed by the garage operators. They maintain and provide security for the fountain, artworks, fixed seating with tables, trees, plantings and open space.

All those concerned in the mini-park's creation—a double-phased consortium of civic and private nonprofit agencies, developers and designers—agree that Biddy Mason Park was a long and intricate process that has proven worthwhile. According to Robert Chattel, the project's CRA planner, the park is heavily used, but since its 1991 dedication, neither the fountain nor the artworks have been defaced, despite the area's high vandalism rate. "The reality is that part of the population is vagrant," Chattel says, "but there is tremendous reverence for these things."

Why? Chattel credits the sensitivity of the collaborative approach as well as creative planning and management. Santa Monica landscape architects Burton & Spitz (a partnership of Pamela Burton, ASLA, and architect Katherine Spitz) were part of the first phase of the design process, along with Chattel, art consultant Michelle Isenberg, California sculptor Eino, and the three developer-owners of the parking garage operation.

The clever fountain—a "grove" of standing pipes of various lengths, diameters and metals with barely visible water—resulted from what was probably this group's biggest challenge. While the CRA required a water element for the park, the parking-garage contractors stipulated that the fountain have no water accu-

mulation "to drink, bathe in or slip on," says Burton. From Eino's initial idea of upright, freestanding pipes, the team developed a structure that serves as walk-through sculpture with or without water.

The fountain's pump is embedded beneath the granite surface of the walkway that flows around the base of the pipes. "Some of the pipes are copper, some are burnt stainless steel, some polished steel," says Chattel. "The water runs down each one differently—down the inside, the outside or in looping spirals. Others have just enough water to coat the pipe, with a little gurgle at the top."

This minimalist treatment of flowing water, as well as the piping itself, refers to the crucial role water has played in the growth of Los Angeles, as well as the need for conservation. Burton notes how the structure recalls the skyline of oil refineries that spurred the city's early development. The Burton & Spitz design also alludes to the region's agrarian past with an allée of camphor trees that suggests shaded country lanes, and a meandering black concrete

walkway inspired by the once free-flowing Los Angeles River. Both Burton and Spitz believe that urban parks, even tiny ones, should help mitigate the tension and confusion of cities.

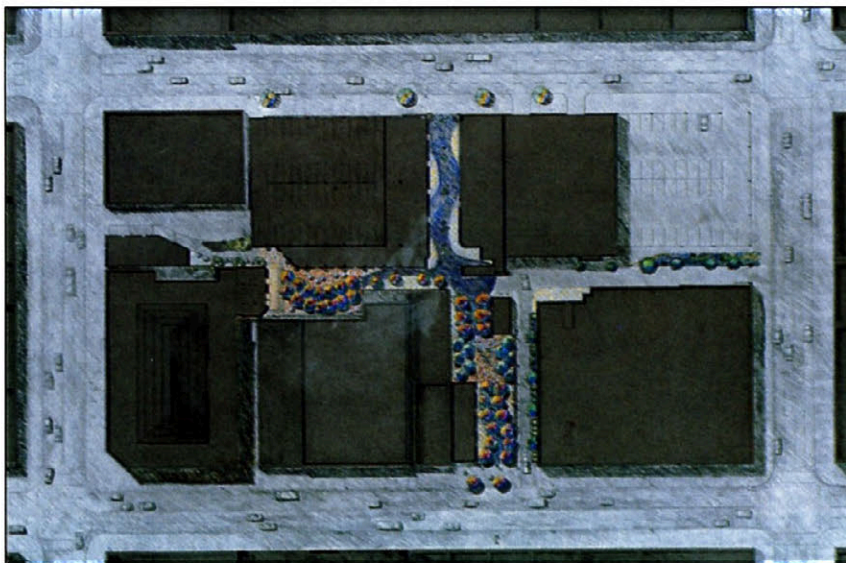
These goals converge with those of the second design team, Power of Place, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to celebrating the city's multi-ethnic history. Power of Place originally identified the site as Biddy Mason's homestead, alerting the CRA to its potential as a

place for public art. Artworks funded and installed by the group include graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's 80-foot mural of Biddy Mason's life and a photomural/assemblage by Bettye Saar evoking the homestead.

"I've seen parents with small children tracing and spelling the words on the wall," says Donna Graves, Power of Place's executive director. "This is a place in downtown L.A. where a black kid can come and learn how to read from a black heroine's commemoration."

Saar's work is a delicate assemblage of architectural elements and photographs inside the garage elevator lobby. Along with the other artworks, it provides this urban-area-in-need with symbols of hope and accomplishment. ■

Ann Wilson Lloyd writes for Art in America and other publications from Cape Cod, Massachusetts.



PROJECT CREDITS

Landscape architects: Burton &

Spitz, Santa Monica, California

Project team: Pamela Burton,

ASLA, principal; Katherine Spitz,

principal; Stephanie Psomas,

project manager; Barbara Kaplan,

project architect

Architects: Office of Charles and

Elizabeth Lee, Los Angeles

Artists: Sheila Levrant de Brette-

ville, Bettye Saar, Susan E. King,

Eino

Client: Community Redevelop-

ment Agency of the City of Los

Angeles and Broadway Spring

Center