

Sowwah Square in Abu Dhabi provides a green retreat in a commercial hub

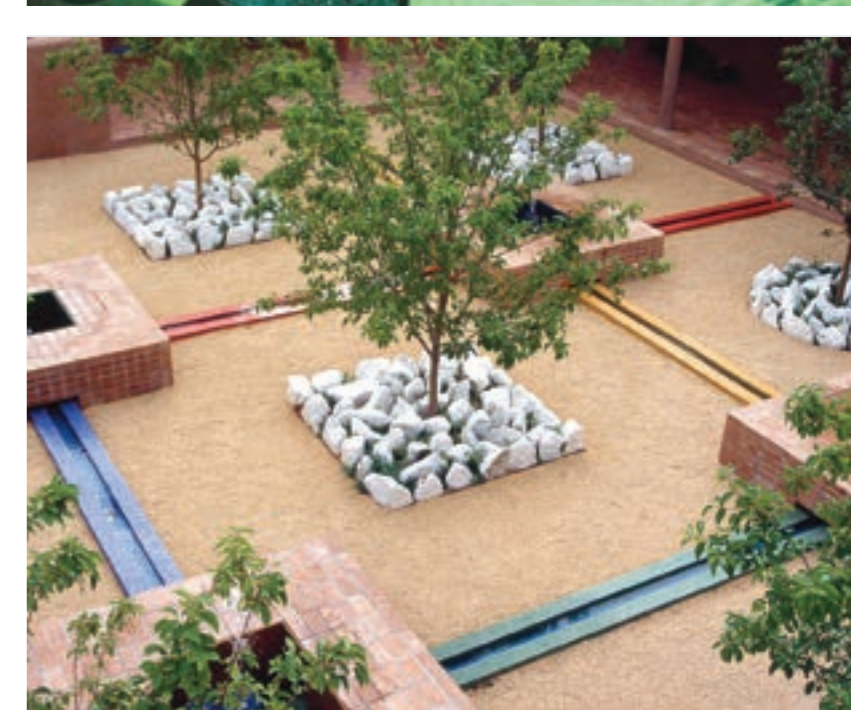
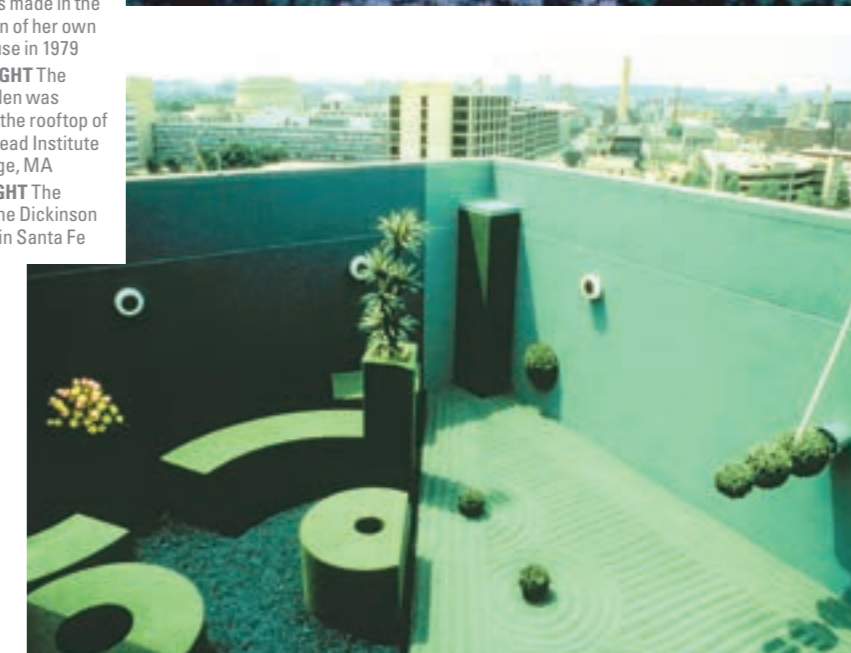
WORDS: Darryl Moore

REBEL HEART

Since her iconic, provocative Bagel Garden, Martha Schwartz has continued to challenge the world of landscape design with her unique approach



FAR LEFT City and Nature was an installation for the International Horticulture Exhibition
LEFT The 16-hectare Fengming Mountain Park in Chongqing, China
TOP RIGHT The Bagel Garden was made in the front garden of her own Boston house in 1979
CENTRE RIGHT The Splice Garden was created on the rooftop of the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge, MA
BELOW RIGHT The garden of the Dickinson Residence in Santa Fe



Martha Schwartz is a landscape architect and artist, and principal of MSP, which has offices in the UK and US. She has won the Honorary Royal Designer for Industry Award and the Cooper Hewitt National Design Award, as well as numerous other awards, fellowships and residencies. Schwartz is also a tenured Professor in Practice of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and an active member of the Landscape Architecture Foundation Climate Change Task Force. www.marthaschwartz.com

Over a career spanning nearly 40 years, Martha Schwartz has established herself as one of the most creative landscape designers working in the field, with a distinct vision and unique style. But if you want to know how to achieve such an esteemed position in the industry, don't ask her for career advice. By her own admission, her trajectory was not charted according to a predetermined game-plan, but rather "it developed organically without me ever having a strategy for it at all," she says. "When I started off doing these little self-made installations that were provocative and somehow taunting of the landscape profession, that was not a strategy for getting work – it was like an anti-strategy!"

It was an anti-strategy that paid off, however, and one that was in no small part due to her background in the arts. "I knew since I was a little girl that I wanted to grow up to be an artist," she says, but as a qualified landscape architect, she felt like a fish out of water, "because I was kind of in-between. If I was going into landscape, that meant I had to be a landscape architect. If I was going into art, why didn't I have an easel

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and paint? What was I doing mucking around in landscape?"

Recognising that landscape as a medium offered a lot of opportunities to do something different, Schwartz began to approach it from an artist's point of view, questioning the status quo. This attitude manifested itself in her early landscape installations and still drives her today. "I always want some kind of artistic satisfaction, that we actually do something cool, interesting or that hasn't been done."

Her first installation in Boston in 1979, the Bagel Garden, consisted of a box parterre in her front garden filled with coloured gravel and a grid of eight dozen waterproofed bagels. Playing with ideas from French and Japanese garden history, the temporary intervention was meant to be a surprise for her husband at the time, landscape architect Peter Walker, upon his return from a trip. While he was not amused, Grady Clay, then editor of *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, was impressed, putting it on the cover and causing waves in the industry. Many people cancelled their subscriptions, and he ended up getting fired. But the garden thrust Schwartz into the limelight. "They said a lot of horrible things about me, but also some interesting, good things – it was highly controversial in the profession."

It has since become a seminal work, encouraging new ways of thinking about landscapes and kickstarting the genre of conceptual gardens. Schwartz explains that students today can't really understand why it was such a big deal at the time. "The profession has changed a lot and I would like to think that the Bagel Garden helped it along, but what I find interesting now is that people know it

because it is taught as landscape history. It wouldn't have any relevance if it were not in that context, but now I'm just somebody out of history!"

Courting controversy

Other early works also took a playful approach, filtering ideas of garden and landscape history through the lenses of minimalism, pop and land art, using bold forms, colours and artificial materials. The defining characteristics of Schwartz's landscape art were honed on projects such as the Whitehead Institute 'Splice Garden', Rio Shopping Centre in Atlanta, Marina Linear Park in San Diego and the Davis and Dickinson residential projects.

The eye-catching nature of the work grabbed the attention of the media. "The design magazines were interested in things that were highly 'image-able', so it meant the works I did very early on were in magazines all around the world. People were interested in the controversy and different point of view, and started calling me up, giving me a chance to do work." This international interest set the template for the way her practice, Martha Schwartz Partners, has developed. She has become a rootless cosmopolitan, moving between cities, embracing a global perspective. "I've never had a local practice. I'm like a nomad – I am in New York now, our main office is still in London, and we have a little office in Shanghai, but we're doing work all over the place. I'll never be a prophet in my own backyard."

Schwartz views this peripatetic mode of working as challenging, especially since the size of projects





ABOVE The rooftop deck of the residences at the Natick Mall
RIGHT Grand Canal Square in the Dublin Docklands



the practice now undertakes has grown to encompass commercial developments, parks and area masterplanning. It requires a sensitivity to the specificity of the location as well as local and national political structures. "There are some places that want to see a design that has cultural connections and it's important there is a narrative, which becomes very helpful in design, where it's like a mantra that keeps you focused," she explains.

The general process of projects begins with consultation, to define the brief and make links to neighbourhood leaders and local government. "It's the communities who end up making the decisions. We can't be responsible for this. We can put the options out there and tell them what we think, but we have to get everybody in place, which is complex." Once the project remit is clear, strategic designs are developed with the intention of addressing long-term needs. The issue of climate change is a real concern of the studio and is addressed at this stage in each project to get clients to think about the challenges they will have to face in the next 10 to 50 years. "We usually go into a conversation about this because the landscape can be an active player in helping to make a site more adaptive or resilient in regards to what's coming. Those are very interesting conversations. Some people don't care, and some don't want to spend the money, but either way, they're going to be spending it, so it's how much do they want to spend and when do they want to spend it." The responses then dictate what is integrated into the final design and ultimately how the landscape is shaped.

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These responses are often culturally defined. "The US puts it off until later, because it's a 'flip-it' economy, but the UK is willing to listen because they have a longer view into the future, and the Chinese have an even longer view, so it depends on how long people think they're going to be owning their property or have to keep value in it." While having done many early projects in the US, she finds the current climate less conducive. "I think it's even more conservative than when I was living and working here 10-12 years ago. Making art costs money and they don't really see it as a functional endeavour that helps anything in any substantial way. They still see it as the cherry on top of the cake," she says. "But people are becoming more aware of urbanism, how cities can grow in a good way and that landscape can be involved in it." She finds it is a bit of a lottery, however, according to the town or city, and dependant on the motivation of mayors and local interest groups.

The Brexit question

Her highest profile project in the UK was the redevelopment of Exchange Square in Manchester, a catalyst for the regeneration of the area following the IRA bombing in 1996. Other projects have included a park in Fryston, filmed for a TV programme with Kevin McCloud that proved to be a baptism of fire for her with the British media; and a colourful intervention at St Mary's Churchyard in Elephant & Castle, London, which resulted in endearingly appreciative feedback from young residents. However, she believes that London is not a particularly vibrant place for landscape design anymore, because of the way that the approval process is structured. "The development community wants to make sure they get through planning, so while they may take a risk with the building, they don't want to with the landscape, which is seen as secondary. It's got to be within strict parameters of not raising hackles, not raising questions."

Schwartz also believes that things are only getting worse for the industry. "The country has shot itself in the foot with →

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Brexit. The people who would come to London because it's a place of excellence are not around now – I know with my own practice it is difficult to get good people now. Europe is a little bit more open, less bound by planning regulations and more interested, so we're allowed to do more,” she says.

Grand Canal Square in the Dublin Docklands, completed in 2007, was an example where the developers saw the value of investing in landscape in the early stages as a way of attracting interest in the area, thereby generating further investment. In the past decade, a distinct geographic pattern has emerged, with work in ambitious developing countries who are willing to take more risks, as they have less to lose but more to gain in doing something artistically interesting. “Those are the places that really want people like us, who have experience from around the world, who can learn the culture and can make something that puts them on the map.” A number of projects in China such as City and Nature Master Garden (2011), Fengming Mountain Park (2014) and Beiqijia Technology Business District (2016), all in Beijing, have afforded the opportunity to work on a scale not found in the US or the UK. Other projects in UAE, Qatar and Indonesia have also allowed MSP to flex their conceptual muscle.

An eye on the future

Wherever they are, however, the challenges of urban density and developing sustainable cities are central to all MSP projects. Schwartz believes that landscape can play an essential role in this. “If you plant trees and allow them to grow so they can thrive, you have tremendous benefits. They cool down the heat-island effect, allowing you to use less energy, draw down carbon dioxide and take in pollutants and toxins from the ozone, create habitats and make the place much more beautiful.” She envisages a future in which autonomous vehicles will allow streetscapes to be transformed to direct water run-off to the trees, and where economies can be established by harvesting the trees and investing in structural wood inventions. “At MIT, there's now so much going on about how technology and ecology intersect. In the face of climate change, we absolutely have to deploy everything we know.”

Schwartz is passionate about passing this knowledge on to new generations, teaching at the prestigious Harvard Graduate School of Design. Along with other leading lights, she participated in the Landscape Architecture Foundation's New Landscape Declaration in 2016, debating the landscape industry's potential to effect real world change and discussing the course of the profession in the 21st century. She is optimistic about using her critical faculties as an artist to turn challenges into opportunities, and to creatively engage and inspire. ○



TOP The Vanke Center in Shenzhen features seasonal gardens, native planting, an urban farm and exciting water elements



BELOW The Beiqijia Technology Business District in Beijing includes a central park and sunken gardens