

Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks

A Cultural Landscape Assessment



Aaron R. Luoma

**Implementation of Preservation
Spring 2007
University of Washington**

Table of Contents:

Introduction

A Park & Canyon

A Symposium

An Artist

A Design

The Problems

Historic Preservation

Opinions & Intentions

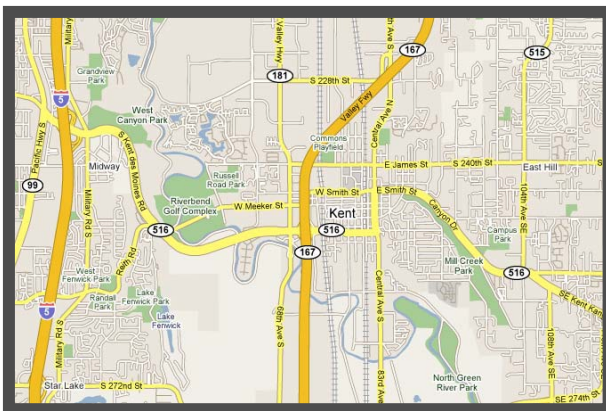
Time Problem

Conclusion

Introduction:

It has been said before that good design is any design that fulfills multiple functions within the same work. Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks is good design. Created by Herbert Bayer, the space functions as a hydrological system of retaining water, creates open space for passive recreation and exemplifies the artistic style known as Earthwork. The preservation of this dam, this park, this sculpture hinders upon our realization and acknowledgement of what good design is and what future generations may learn from.

A Park & Canyon:



Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks is located in Kent, Washington. The small park is adjacent to downtown and many suburban communities. The five-acre parcel forms the end of a vast canyon that stretches for a few miles westward. Mill Creek runs through the middle of this steep canyon, through the Earthworks, and continues on through the valley until it empties into the Green River. The

creek collects water from a larger watershed that mainly includes residential communities and a larger commercial corridor running along SR 516.

The canyon itself has played an important role in the history of Kent, and contributes to the cultural context of the Earthworks. Midway through the canyon there are remnants of an old logging mill and dam along the creek. Several large cedar stumps found throughout the canyon have notches for springboards. At the location of the mill there was also a small coal mining operation. The operations that took place here were a part of the settlement of the valley. On top of the canyon on a small plateau there existed a farmstead called Old Gould Farm. This farmstead was one of the first along the canyon and was a part of the original settlement of the city of Kent. The farm has subsequently been given to the city of Kent's parks department. No structures still exist, but several ornamental trees and orchards with larger meadows mark its location. The canyon was logged extensively as the steep hillsides prevented development. The city of Kent bought the canyon property in a series of acquisitions that held that the property must be kept as open park space. Some



historical documents even suggest the canyon was burned entirely in the early 20th century, but no physical evidence of this remains today.

The canyon contains a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna. The depths of the canyon provide good habitat for a variety of creatures, included foxes. Mill Creek is a Salmon stream and is monitored by the Department of Fish and Wildlife regularly. The middle of the canyon, near the old log mine provides good cool water and rubble for the salmon to lay their eggs. The hillsides of the canyon contain mostly native species. It is only when the canyon gets closer to the Earthworks that more invasive species are prevalent. There are a few locations where illegal dumping has been a problem in the past, and where invasive species have sprung up, but no such occurrences have been seen recently. Several stormwater piping systems carry water from the communities along side the canyon straight into the stream. Some of these pipes are stainless steel ribbed; others are buried with historical brick covered manholes for access. Mostly, the vegetation relatively obscures these pipes. Several trails of natural character circulated up and down the canyon, though through recent storms the creek, forcing the parks department to post signs that the trails are closed, has washed out the trails. Several old wooden bridges line the trails, crossing smaller tributaries and springs along the hillside. The condition of these trails and bridges is dire. Some other illegal activities by vagrant youth and homeless populations have been a problem recently, but management and local citizens have seemed to help solve this by watching the canyon more closely. The original site of the Earthworks contained the existing sedimentation pond, and several smaller wetlands as the stream emptied out into larger meadows. The steep hillsides and lack of development in the canyon has provided a unique ecological rich area amid the growing city of Kent.

A Symposium

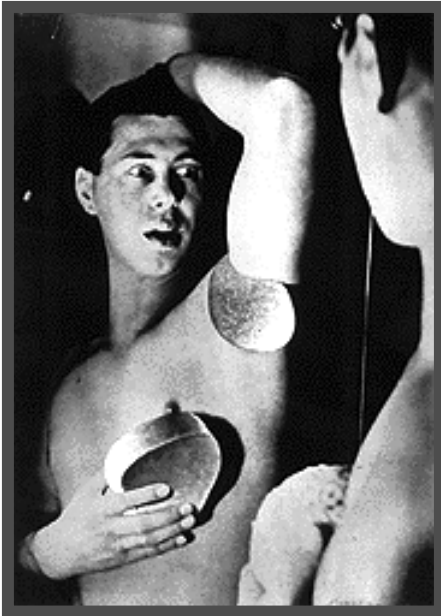


The Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks derived from a larger important symposium held by the King County Arts Commission in 1979. Entitled, *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture* the commission sought to use the creative ability of public artists as a means to reclaim land that had been polluted, forgotten or in need of ecological improvements. Eight artists were selected to

develop designs for specific assigned sites. The artists were; Robert Morris, Iain Baxter, Richard Fleishner, Lawrence Hanson, Mary Miss, Dennis Oppenheim,

Beverly Pepper, and Herbert Bayer. Each of these artists were all well known nationally and internationally recognized as leaders in the public art realm. Proposals were made and the Robert Morris' piece, Johnson Pit #30 was selected to be built. The proposals were put on display at the Seattle Art Museum and the entire collection went on a national tour, as this was one of the first events of its kind to incorporate public art with land reclamation. Several books, papers and other publications were produced about the symposium that still remains a landmark event for the local and national community. Robert Morris' piece was designed and built near the city of limits of Kent, and was incorporated into an old gravel mine. The park still exists today as a spiral bowl with views to the valley. During construction there were several problems with drainage; most critics would agree that the parks design to incorporate public involvement is not as successful as the Earthworks. Morris' piece remains more of a sculptural spectacle to be viewed.

An Artist



Separate from the symposium in the beginning, Herbert Bayer was selected afterwards to create a proposal for the city of Kent. The city of Kent's mayor, Isabel Hogan, who was involved with the symposium, jumped at the opportunity to hire Herbert Bayer. Herbert Bayer was born in 1900 in Haag, Austria. Early on he developed an interest in architecture, art and topography. At one point he even hiked through Italy earning his living as a house painter. He eventually worked under a few reputable designers and made his way to the Bauhaus school in Berlin, where he taught topography and graphic design. He worked with such famous

designers as Walter Gropius, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Marcel Breuer. In the mid 1920's he was the art director for Vogue Magazine. He would go on to publish several books with other Bauhaus colleagues and became a forerunner in the new design philosophy that emphasized functionality. He later moved to New York before the beginning of WWII and created several pieces for the Museum of Modern Art. After the war Bayer moved to Aspen, Colorado, where he was a design consultant of the development of the new town. In Aspen he became involved and contributed heavily to the Aspen Institute, which still exists today as a resource center for humanistic



studies and design. In 1955 Bayer created the very first earthwork of its kind in Aspen, long before the Mill Creek Earthworks or other notable Earthworks like the Spiral Jetty by Smithson (1970). Bayer became one of, if not the first designer to create artful forms with earth. He would later design a sculpture for the Olympic games in Mexico City, and develop his own font style. In 1979 he would design the Mill Creek Earthworks, one of his last sculptures and one of the most successful and fully realized projects before his death in 1985 in Montecito, California. Herbert Bayer was known as a public artist, a painter, a graphic designer, an architect, photographer and author.



A Design

After being commissioned to create some ideas for a new park in the city of Kent, Herbert Bayer developed two plans and several ideas all within a single isolated weekend. The city of Kent was having some flooding problems with Mill Creek and had hired URS Engineers to develop a dam and public park for the area that is now Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks. The city was not happy with what the engineers had proposed. Though it satisfied the functionality of a dam, the aesthetics were quite geometric, and most of all not inviting as a public park.

The large basin where water would be collected was fenced off, and a small trail circled the area. The lack of aesthetics and usable park space prompted the design for Herbert Bayer to incorporate the function of the dam set by the engineers, but also to soften the



aesthetics and create a usable public park for the community to enjoy. Bayer was shown these plans and promised to "adhere as closely as possible to the engineer's proposals," (Bayer 1979). Bayer's design for the new park was enthusiastically accepted. The city of Kent's Arts Commission stated, "The Bayer design softens the effect of the functional structure without reducing the effectiveness of the berm. It is an exemplary design, ideally suited to the need for passive recreation in the core of the community." The engineers revised their drawings according to the Bayer's vision and the park was built with limited constraints but set a precedent for the cooperation between city agencies, artists, and engineering consultants. The park opened up on September 4th, 1982.



The main characteristics of the design are quite similar to what was proposed by the engineers. The main berm, which acts as the dam for the creek during flooding, is of similar shape. The implementation of a bridge crossing at a second detention area is also similar. Yet, all the edges are rounded smoothed out to evoke a more natural appearance. Small mounds rest on top of the larger berm, and a clear sign of negative and positive spaces are expressed with vertical

mounds and depressions. A small pond, termed the doughnut for its shape, collects water from the creek by a diverted channel from the upper sedimentation pond. A larger raised doughnut shape is cut into two areas by a path and this same side channel. The park functions perfectly in retaining water during flooding, and historical photos and even recent accounts from this past winter have proven its effectiveness. The park is also widely used by the public as an open space for passive recreation. There are ample amounts of large grassy areas for children to play around, or to enjoy a picnic. The Earthworks is also a stunning artwork. The forms are distinct enough to stand out from the natural landscape of the canyon, but soft enough to work with the landscape and resemble a combination of the natural and the man made.



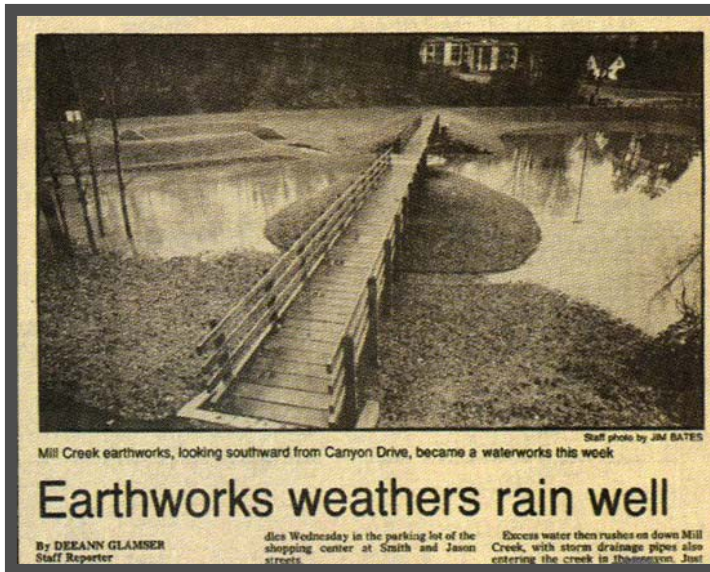
In 1984 shortly before Bayer's death, minor additions were added to the park to improve the public park amenities. These included stair access to adjacent highway, amphitheatre, shelter, restrooms, and lighting. These plans were shown to Bayer and he approved them. The additions are incorporated into the park along the periphery of its boundaries, so that the main artistic elements of the park are not hindered in any way by appearance or by function. The additions remain distinct and separated from the open space park areas.

The Problems

This cultural landscape assessment is being conducted based upon a few problems have recently risen concerning several aspects of the park and the preservation of its character.

Due to increased amounts of development surrounding the canyon since the creation of the park, more amounts of water are being funneled down into the canyon and Mill Creek. Hence, the city of Kent is experiencing more flooding due to Mill Creek because the original design of the dam no longer meets the

requirements for today. The park needs to be able to retain more water to prevent further flooding downstream. Particularly, the adjacent Senior Center repeatedly experiences flooding problems.



Secondly, the Department of Ecology, which is responsible for the safety dams, has concluded that the Mill Creek Earthworks Dam is not adequate for the safety of the city of Kent during a 10,000-year storm event. Though this seems like an outrageous number to design to, the DOE has maintained such standards for all its dams based upon the number of people who could possibly die if the dam were to collapse under such

conditions. During a 10,000-year storm event, the city and the creek will flood, there is not stopping that, the DOE is primarily concerned with the dam breaching under such amounts of water. It has proposed that a second spillway be added to prevent this breaching and to lessen the amount of pressure behind the dam during such a disastrous storm event. The current spillway is a vertical pipe at the north end of the dam that collects water through a large inlet and filter for debris when the water gets backed up to a certain level. The DOE is concerned that this spillway may get clogged and is requiring that a second spill way be placed to prevent this. The city of Kent has responded by hiring RW Beck Engineers. They have proposed several solutions to handle both of these new requirements. The solution that the city has elected to follow, pending further investigation is raising the entire dam approximately 18" to allow more water to be retained while not raising the parking lot elevation so that the entire parking lot acts as the second spillway around the main portion of the dam.

Lastly, there are a couple of problems surrounding the general maintenance of the park. Large amounts of invasive species have slowly begun to grow along the hillsides within the park and particularly invading portions of the park itself so that some elements are hardly visible (e.g. the cut doughnut shape has blackberries growing on one side). Native species are also slowly taking back the park. The creek itself was designed to



be visible and now native Alders have screened the creek and other features like the cone that the bridge rests on top of. The doughnut pond also has several wetland species growing in it. The general appearance of the park is unkempt and not nearly like the original intentions of the Herbert Bayer who sought to design the park with clean lines like a new manicured landscape.

From these problems, a University of Washington, Landscape Architecture studio was hired to come up with solutions and other creative alternatives that would retain more water, create a second spillway, not hinder the original intent of the designer, and develop management programs for the invasive and native species in the park. Seven teams developed seven solutions that were all widely accepted and the city is currently evaluating each of them for their costs, and feasibility. The city would like to implement several of the ideas purely on the basis of aiding the flooding problems elsewhere along the canyon and in other parts of the city. All seven solutions saw that the raising of the dam would adversely harm the intentions of Bayer and the possibilities of preserving the overall integrity of the park for historic preservation purposes. By raising the dam, the park's proportions are changed, and visitors are placed closer to the busy highway, more land is flooded, and the aesthetics are changed dramatically. This process will continue on into the summer and next fall, as the park will celebrate its 25th Anniversary.

Historic Preservation

It is obvious that this park is significant in many ways to the community of Kent, and that its integrity is threatened by a number of pressing issues. The following is the list of criteria that need to be met for a cultural landscape to be placed on the National Register; it is derived from Bulletin 18 produced by the National Park Service:

- A. Be associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. Be associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- c. Embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- d. Have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Upon an examination, criteria A, B, and C are integral parts of why this park is significant. Note that only one criterion needs to be met in order for the landscape to be placed on the register.

Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to our history by its relationship to King County's Earthworks Symposium. Jerry Allen, the director of King County's Art Commission during the Symposium states, "Establishing the context of the Earthworks relative to the symposium gives the project more merit for preservation." Not only were a number of world renowned public artists a part of this symposium, the theme and vision for the project was one of the first of its kind. The incorporation of public art, usable space, with reclamation projects had only been briefly examined in theory and hardly applied physically. The ability for interagency cooperation between arts, public works, ecology, parks was truly an event worth preserving by making sure that the outcomes, the results of this symposium are preserved, namely the preservation of Bayer's Earthworks.



The park is associated with the lives of person significant to our past because of Herbert Bayer. Bayer's legacy lives on today through studies and applications of ecological design and the development of land art. His design combines the function of design with the aesthetics of art and the inviting spaces of a traditional park. Only one other earthwork project exists by Bayer (in Aspen) and that park is only for aesthetic and park purposes located within private property. Mill Creek Earthworks is a public space, a sculpture and a functioning hydrologic system to prevent flooding. It is has been difficult to place a value on his contribution to society is because of his broad talents. Bayer was truly an interdisciplinary designer, and his talents

encompassed many professions (i.e. architecture, landscape architecture, graphic design, interior design, public artist, sculptor, photographer, and author). His national and internationally reputation as a world class designer gives great warrant towards the preservation of Mill Creek Earthworks, one of his last projects, and by far one of his most fully realized and successfully landscapes.

Lastly, Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks embodies the distinctive character of Earthwork style. The parks features unquestionable evoke the style of Earthworks. Bayer's first earthwork in 1955 was the beginning; by 1979 he had refined the art form. It can't be said that he was the founder of the movement or the style, but his contributions early on certainly enhanced the art form, and gave it a world renowned status of something novel to pursue. Other earthworks by Simthson or Maya Lin have continued the art form to this day, making it one of the most recognizable styles in land art. As mentioned before, Mill Creek Earthworks goes well beyond the conventional earthwork and incorporates multiple



functions. No other earthwork includes the functions and aesthetics of sculpture, open space, and hydrology as the Mill Creek Earthworks does.

While being placed on the national register promotes the park for tourism and awareness the national status does little to actually protect the park empirically. Earlier this year, the city of Kent adopted the King County criteria for historic preservation. The codes involved with the county's preservation program include such language that has a greater degree of protection and funding opportunities. Since the park and the project evolved from the King County Earthworks Symposium, this shows the importance the park has for the county as well as the city of Kent. The following criteria are listed:

- a. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of national, state or local history;
- b. Is associated with the lives of person significant in national, state or local history;
- c. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, style or method of design or construction, or that represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack distinction;
- d. Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important to prehistory or history;
- E. Is an outstanding work of a designer or builder who has made a substantial contribution to the art.

The criterion for the county is quite similar, so the last unique point will be address here. The last criterion mentioned here is especially situated for the preservation of Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks. The earthworks is an outstanding work of Herbert Bayer, who has made a substantial contribution to the style of Earthwork as well as several other styles and disciplines. It cannot be argued that this Earthwork was one of his last projects before his death, and it remains to this day one of his most successful public projects.

Opinions & Intentions

In order to understand the Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks to a fuller extent, a series of interviews and correspondence was conducted with those who knew Herbert Bayer or who were involved with this particular project. A few of these people, what they currently do and their involvement are:

Paul Hobson – Public Artist, Bayer's Assistant

Jerry Allen – Public Artist, Former KC Arts

Nancy Leahy –with City of Kent Arts during project

Gwen Chanzit – World Renown Bayer Scholar, curator for Bayer Collection at Denver Art Museum and professor at University of Denver

Nancy Thorpe – With City of Kent Arts during project

John Hoge – Local public artist, involved with project, took many original photos

Charlie Sundberg – KC Preservation Planner

Charles Birnbaum – Cultural Landscape Foundation

Richard Andrews – Henry Art Gallery

Cheryl dos Remedios – Public Artist, Current Visual Arts Coordinator for City of Kent

The opinions, voices and memories from these individuals supported many of the claims made in this report, and help to provide more evidence for Herbert Bayer's intentions and reasons for the preservation of the Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks.

Thorough archival research was also conducted at the city of Kent's archives for materials related to the project. A number of typed correspondences between agencies, Bayer and other individuals provided key first-hand information regarding the research into the park. It became clear that the intentions of Bayer truly were to create a park that had clean lines, and manicured lawn. There were never any mentions of creating more natural features, but the design was seen as natural all ready. It was an amalgam of the man-made realm of the city and the engineers with the canyon itself. Bayer toured the canyon and was mesmerized by its wildness, but knew he did not want to recreate that. The park had to be usable for passive recreation, but to soften the appearance and materials of a typical dam proposed by the engineers. Here are a few exceptional quotes from Bayer that support these claims:

"While my previous earthworks are primarily concerned with the issues of sculpture as art alone, the mill creek earthworks have a decided purpose and function."

"Conditioned by rules of water flow and maintenance"

"A dam in the ordinary sense constitutes a radical interference with the natural configuration of the land. My intent was, therefore, to give the dams a natural appearance conforming to the landscape (surroundings), and to become integral parts of the new landscape being created."

"I am very satisfied and pleased by the overall appearance of the park ... the overall impression is that of a new landscape. Exactly what I intended it to be."

It seems that the issues surrounding the invasive and native species that have subsequently grown since the opening of the park need to be dealt with. To revert back to the original vision of Bayer, to reconstruction parts of the stream, are parts of preserving this park.

Time Problem

In the historic preservation criteria for the National Register and King County, there are age restrictions. The National Register lists that landscapes are at least 50 years old in order to be placed on the register. The county specifies that landscapes be at least 40 years old. Mill Creek Earthworks will celebrate its 25th anniversary this coming fall, (2007). Yet, within both agencies, there is language in place, under reasonable means that landscapes younger than 50 or 40 years can be preserved, "if it is of exceptional importance," (NPS). The National Criteria states, "Scholarly recognition is usually required to establish exceptional significance because only that type of analysis can convincingly demonstrate that despite the lack of the passage of the fifty-year period, sufficient historical perspective exists to evaluate the particular property...If the work of art is an integral part of the design for the landscape, it may make the entire landscape eligible for the National Register even if it is less than fifty years old." King County states, "Criteria Consideration 8: forbids the designation of properties achieving significance within the past forty (40) years unless such properties are of exceptional importance." What determines if a landscape is of exceptional importance remains fairly subjective. Certainly the Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks hold exceptional importance to the local community of Kent and King County based upon the significance of the symposium, the design by Herbert Bayer, and the style of earthworks. Base on National Criteria, admittedly would be hardly to convince review boards. Yet, the international significance of Herbert Bayer and being this one of his last projects, his last earthwork, and perhaps his most successfully public project, would be hard to deny of its importance nationally. Tourists from around the world recognize this park and Bayer's significance all ready by visiting Kent and the Park, it seems if the park does not achieve such significance nationally, and it's by our own short sightedness. The pressing issues that may forever alter the parks features also present merit to preserve this park now, and not later when it might be too late.

Conclusion

Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks is a significant park to the city of Kent, King County and perhaps nationally. Yet, the same engineering minded forces that originated its creation threaten its integrity. Raising the dam every several years cannot simply solve the threat of continual flooding due to increased amounts of

development. This is a small, temporary patch on a very large leak. When Herbert Bayer designed the park he envisioned a space that would adhere to the functions of a hydrological system, create a usable inviting public park, and incorporate the style of earthwork as an artistic sculpture. This is much like a three-legged stool where each component has equal importance. When one is given greater attentions, (i.e. raising the dam for hydrological reasons) the whole system is skewed and the stool is off balance. The remaining components suffer. Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks was designed and built upon three equal supports. In the preservation of the Earthworks, these three supports must be considered equally. The preservation of this park relies on the extent of our desire to support future ecologically innovative design and the legacy of an individual who excelled at it.

