



Jacob Javits Plaza,  
New York City, 1996

Schwartz used  
winding continuous  
benches to animate  
the plaza in the  
absence of trees.

## Better than nature

Martha Schwartz's landscape architecture is creative, colourful and unexpected, often in the face of client indifference.

Ellie Duffy heard her talk at the RIBA

According to star American landscape architect Martha Schwartz, all clients want the same thing from landscape architecture: something quick, cheap and green. In a culture that blindly professes a love of nature, the commissioning of design for spaces in the wake of new building is too frequently an afterthought, cobbled together with limited ambition and the dregs of a budget.

Schwartz, the subject of a comprehensive new book from Thames & Hudson, has been making colourful and unexpected landscapes for predominantly urban spaces in the US, Japan and Europe for more than 20 years, and is now also a professor of landscape architecture at Harvard. In the UK, she is perhaps best known as the designer of Manchester's new Exchange Square, an important left-over space created between the old Corn Exchange and new retail buildings constructed in 2000 to replace the bombed Arndale Centre.

Choosing the defiant title "I Hate Nature" for her illuminating talk at the RIBA last week, Schwartz prefaced a presentation of her often exuberant work with a swingeing analysis of the cultural and professional context within which her career has developed. In Massachusetts alone, she says, urban sprawl is advancing at a rate of 16ha per day. These new landscapes consist not just of buildings, but the wastelands of highways and parking lots between them; what she calls "an endless vanilla of landscape environments with 'subs' disengaged from their 'urbs'". But, she says, "we've built the landscape we live in. We've already made the choice to control nature - now we have to choose either to design it or abdicate the design process."

There is, she argues, a particular combination of cultural attitudes within the US that has prevented a more considered approach to the creation of the built environment in the first place. In her talk, Schwartz identified five cultural characteristics that she believes are the root of the problem. First, the prevalence of the nature fantasy - "We are fed on images of nature like soft porn," she says. Second, and not unconnected, is the widespread belief that nature is somehow an inappropriate subject matter for design. Third is a peculiarly American pride in pragmatism; fourth the dangerous combination of the muteness of the landscape architecture profession and the myopia of architects in not being able to see beyond the footprint of a building; and fifth, landscape tokenism, or "pot plants on a 1,000 acres of concrete".

Railing against the myopia of architects seems to have generated the inventiveness behind some of Schwartz's most powerful schemes. These have been to regenerate the plazas – or podiums – created at the base of iconic modernist buildings of the fifties and sixties. These thin crusts of concrete representing the ground in fact veil layers of underground car parking and are structurally incapable of supporting the topsoil required for planting schemes and the rootballs of trees.

What can be done? In her 1996 scheme for the Jacob Javits Plaza in Manhattan, Schwartz reclaimed the plaza simply (and cheaply) by providing seating – an extrapolation of the ubiquitous slatted park bench into a series of sinuous, seemingly endless benches that curve around fenced-off miniature turfed “hills”, dodging New York shadows.

A similar scheme for the US Courthouse plaza in Minneapolis in 1997 creates a shoal of teardrop-shaped “drumlins” – the strange symptoms of glacial scarring that litter the Minnesota landscape. These 1.8m-high earth mounds are turfed and planted with Jack Pine, a local species of gnarled, dwarf tree. Dotted lines of silver-sprayed logs provide places to sit and a reminder of the timber industry that once defined the city.

At the Department of Housing & Urban Development in Washington DC, Schwartz was commissioned in 1998 to re-characterise the face of Marcel Breuer's 1968 building, which distances itself from the street with the usual desolate expanse of plaza. Here, there is no “nature” at all, with Schwartz instead introducing a cluster of giant “mechanical trees” – bold doughnuts of stretched white plastic that balance precariously on tall sticks – which provide either shelter or shade, as well as illumination at night. Schwartz originally planned this scheme as a riot of colour in a sea of concrete, but this proved too much for the client, who demanded a white-only version.

The scale of projects has grown over the years, with ongoing schemes including the Geraldton Mine Project, instigated to tackle some of the 20,000ha of industrial spoil created by the Ontario mining industry, and a recent competition win for 7.5km of coastal road in Doha, Qatar.

But it is a 7m x 11m roof garden executed at the beginning of Schwartz's career that perhaps best communicates an approach to landscape that resolutely refuses to pander to expectations. The 1986 Splice Garden for the Whitehead Institute of Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts, fills a space designated by the building's architect for a garden. Finding no structure, no plan for maintenance and, importantly, no water, Schwartz devised a scheme of Astroturf topiary and raked glass aquarium chips that grafts together elements of traditional French Renaissance and Japanese gardens. A cry in plastic against the abuse of nature.

*The Vanguard Landscapes and Gardens of Martha Schwartz*, edited by Tim Richardson. Thames & Hudson, HB, 224pp. £33.