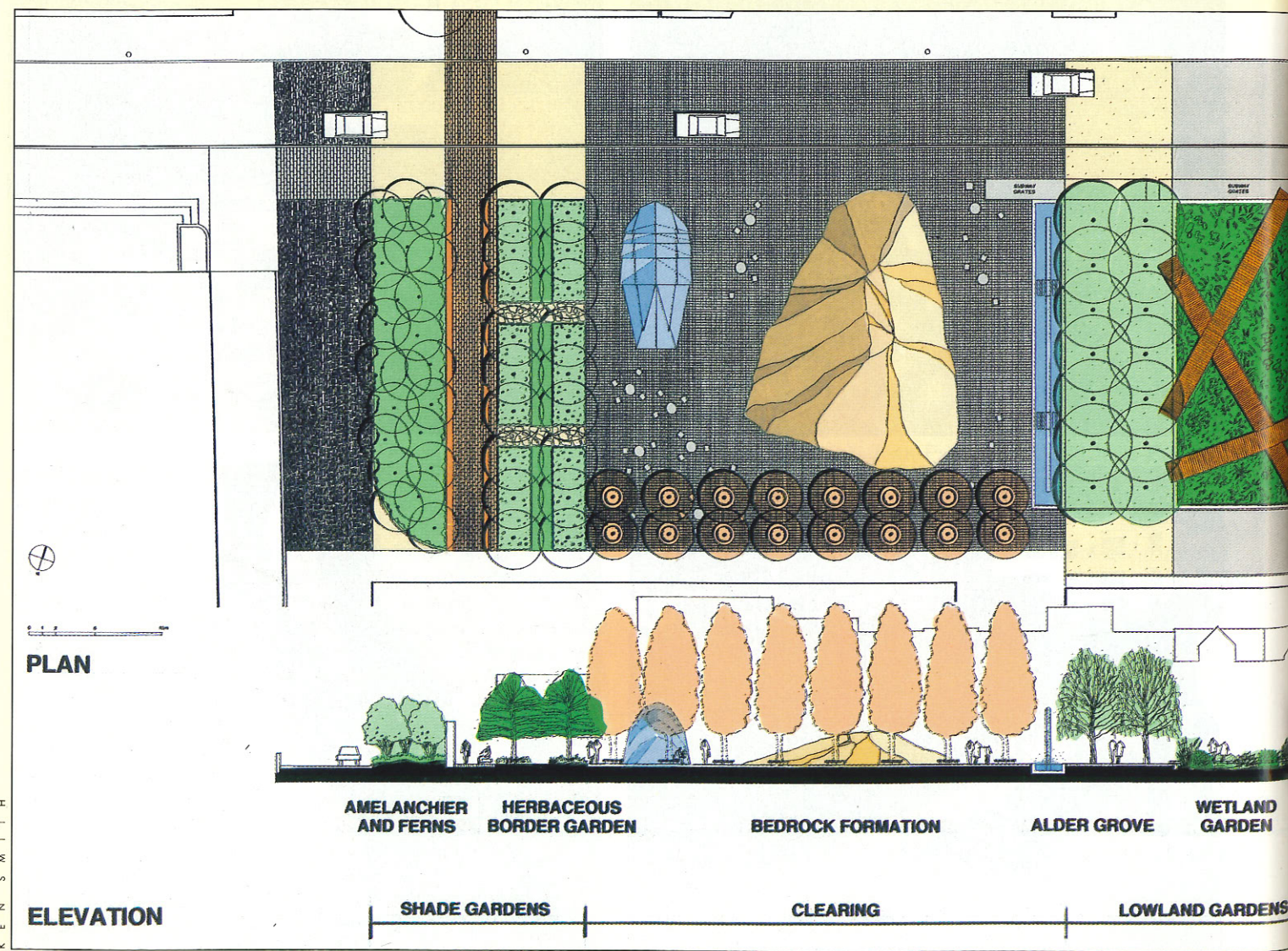
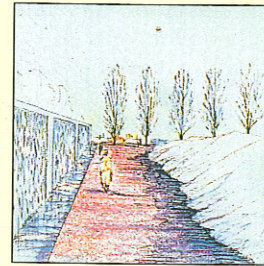


BOX SET: CUMBERLAND PARK

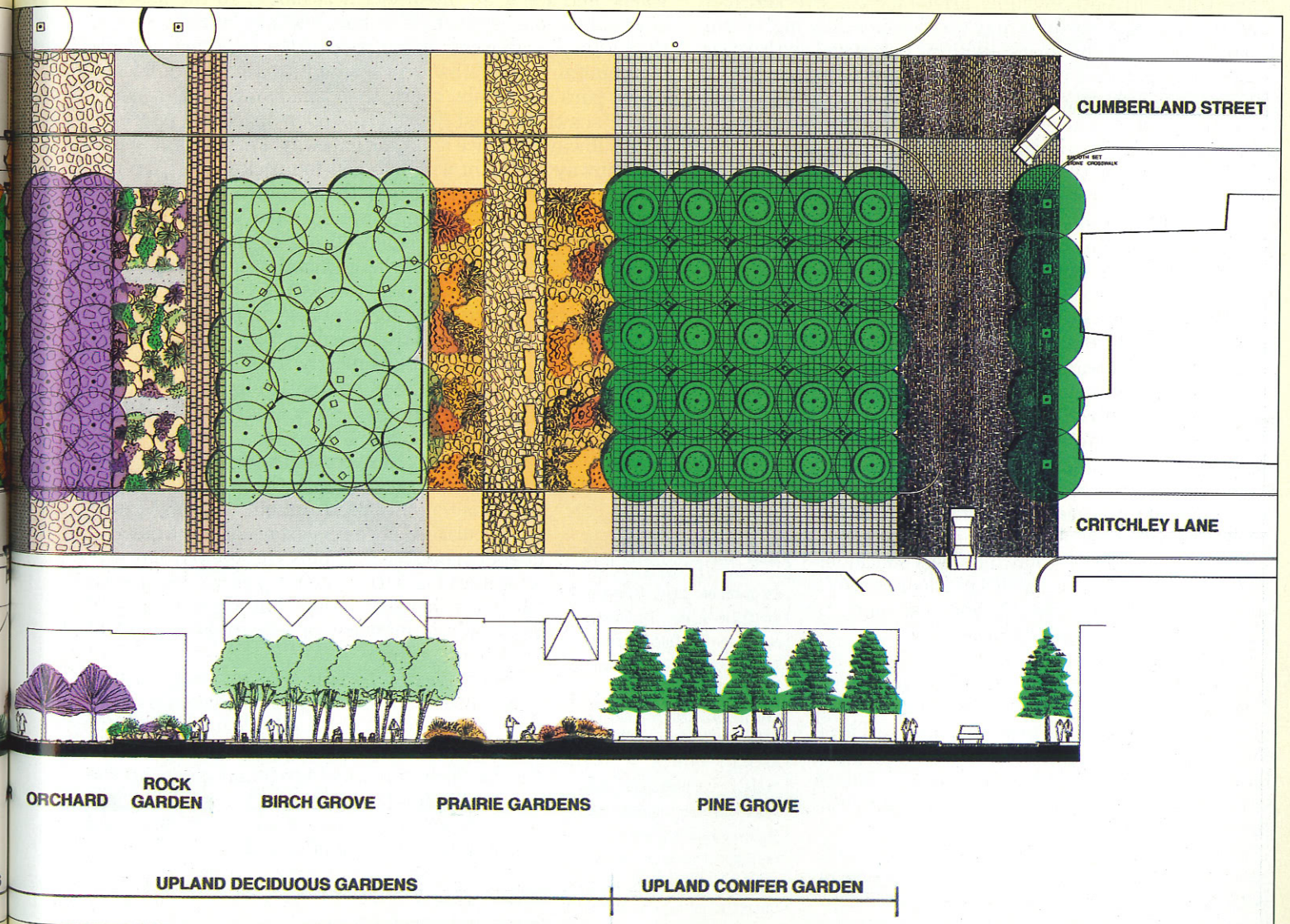
BY MAC GRISWOLD



"In the center of the great modern city," writes Robert Fishman, the author of *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, "Frederick Law Olmsted believed, there



Below: Like a Victorian collection box, Toronto's 500-foot-long Cumberland Park arranges Canada's habitats side by side. By extending the lot lines and the urban grid, the plan addresses urban ecology as well. Above: Landscape architect Chip Sullivan's sketches for three different "boxes."



Hedge study suggests the form for the park, which will open this summer. Its centerpiece: a giant hollowed-out boulder pried from the Ontario earth.

should be a place of absolute repose, an expanse of greenery large enough to screen out the turmoil . . . a place so beautiful that all the stresses of civilized life could be healed."

Toronto's Cumberland Park will debut this summer as the post-Olmstedian opposite of that iconic anodyne, a park that screens all out. Instead, in a startling, serious and witty way, landscape architect Ken Smith, architects Oleson Worland and collaborators connected this small urban space with the wider polity of precious open land everywhere.

They designed eight "compartments," a lexicon of beloved symbols of Canadian nature: glaciated rock, bog, ice and especially trees. Unlike an Olmsted park, there won't be a shred of lawn. Granite and asphalt pavers, aggregate and flagstone will contribute enough variety for the eye and foot. And though eight gardens may seem impossibly high-maintenance, most of the spaces will be patterned with trees, water and light, not changing displays of flowers.

Located in Yorkville, the upscale, downtown boutique district, the park measures only 500 by 88 feet, but has taken 18 years to come into existence. Although the land was designated a park in 1973, for many years since it had functioned as the city's highest-grossing parking lot. When the city council proposed to fatten this cash cow by building a parking garage, Yorkville citizens galvanized in opposition.

Thanks to their efforts and the city's dawning environmental consciousness, a juried international competition was held for the space in 1991. The budget of \$3 million (Canadian) was ample but not opulent. Moreover, says Smith, "there was a contradiction in the competition brief itself." How, on nine-tenths of an acre, could the design team "provide clear symbols of the social and cultural history of the Village of Yorkville" while fulfilling demands to create "a natural oasis," as the brief said?

Physical hurdles compounded this conceptual riddle. First, a leap in scale between the buildings lining the two long sides of the oblong space. On the north, Victorian row houses—now home to boutiques and shops—face the backsides of Bloor Street's sun-blocking high rises. Second, the park is directly above a subway station.

The designers answered with an ingenious fusion of local history and regional environment. They divided the block into eight rectangles of varying widths, each differently planted. These follow the lot lines of the Victorian houses they face. "I was intrigued by the houses," Smith says, "and by the idea of dragging their footprint across the street."

The notion to plant these rectangular divisions to represent Canada's ecological niches, both natural and artificial, had another inspiration: "The collection boxes that Victorian

schoolchildren—and scientists—used for insect and mineral specimens come out of the same period vocabulary as the architecture," says Smith. He looked to them, as well as to the work of Chip Sullivan.

Running east-west, the "collection box" lineup begins with a stand of 25-foot Scots pines, each limbed up and circled

by seats Oleson Worland designed for weary shoppers or lunching office workers. (Residents favored a passive park for individuals or small groups, not large ones.) Next is a pair of "Ontario meadow" borders thick with compass plants

and other natives, to be followed by a stand of river birch, a rock garden, an "orchard" of crabapples (*Malus 'Makanik'*), a wet meadow crossed by diagonal *yatsushashi*-like boardwalks, and a thicket of corkscrew willows. In the absence of visual screening, much effort has gone into "aural" screens, the baffle of water sound and tree rustle. One such feature is a fountain "wall" that will freeze into a fringe of icicles.

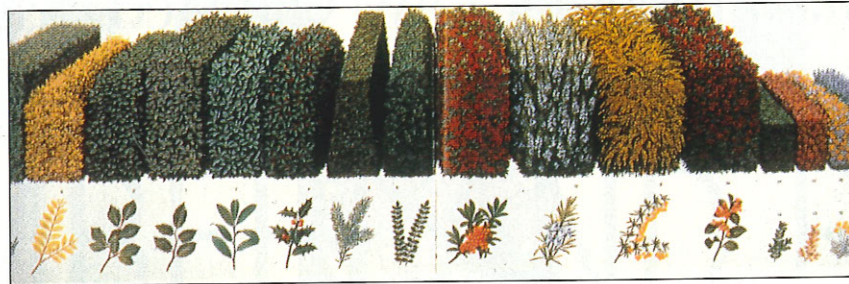
The park's symbolic heart, the Canadian Shield clearing, comprises the largest "box." This open space will serve as both subway entrance and park gateway. Poised right above the subway platform will be a 650-ton rock pried from the Ontario earth. The granite leviathan required special treatment. In its natural state, it would have weighed nearly twice as much, but was hollowed out to lighten the load above the subway. Part of the glacial debris that comprises the geological formation known as the Canadian Shield, it will provide a lofty seat for espresso sippers.

Beyond this "clearing," the so-called Victorian perennial garden, which in fact contains mostly woodland plants like columbine and snakeroot, will be lightly shaded with Shubert cherries. At the extreme west, a quincunx of serviceberry will stand among ferns.

"Successful gardens," writes garden historian John Dixon Hunt, "always have been those where the ensemble of elements is not only beautiful but also answers to a particular society's deepest needs." The design's deeper meaning that pins these environments wing-to-wing within their boxes is inescapable. They are here to enjoy, but may ultimately exist only in memory, or as rare specimens of vanished species.

Hearteningly, Toronto is now trying to preserve what Cumberland Park represents in miniature. The park also depicts the "nature" of northern Ontario and other provinces: the prairies, the northern forests of birch and pine; and the sub-Arctic tundra called the Canadian carpet, where bearberry grows wild with a thousand other tiny, hardy organisms. ■

Mac Griswold wrote "BPC's Latest: Hudson River Park" in December 1992.



PROJECT CREDITS

Competition team: Schwartz/Smith/Meyer, Inc., San Francisco; Oleson Worland Architects, Toronto; Chip Sullivan, Berkeley, California

Project designer: Ken Smith

Project manager: David Meyer, ASLA

Project administrators: Peter Walker William Johnson and Partners, San Francisco; Oleson Worland Architects, Sharon McKenzie, project manager

Client: City of Toronto, Ontario