

GARDEN NOTEBOOK

Paula Deitz

A Twinkling Terrace That Reaches for the Stars

PARIS

ZOOMING up the Champs-Élysées in her Saab, Kathryn Gustafson, an American landscape architect, stopped to admire bouquets of roses tightly arrayed in the rear window of a florist's truck. "That's a garden, too," she said, and she drove on.

New Yorkers had better prepare themselves for such judgments. Ms. Gustafson, 47, has been handed her first American project, the Arthur Ross Terrace at the American Museum of Natural History, scheduled to open in the spring of 2000.

Her new, nearly one-acre urban garden will be just outside the moon-like sphere, designed by Polshek & Partners, that will house the new planetarium. Ms. Gustafson's terrace, on the 81st Street side of the museum, will echo what's inside, with a long slanting shadow of dark granite — meant to evoke a lunar eclipse — that will glisten with streaks of water and twinkle with fiber-optic stars depicting the constellation Orion.

James Stewart Polshek, architect of the planetarium, said Ms. Gustafson won the competition to design the terrace because "she understood that the design must be metaphorically linked to the planetarium."

Ellen V. Futter, the museum's president, said she found Ms. Gustafson's spare design for the terrace "elegant yet simple, harmonizing both with nature on earth and with the universe beyond, in a physical context." She expects that crowds will be drawn to the pristine quality of this public space, and to Ms. Gustafson's fantasy of fiber-optic starlight that will sparkle at night.

Until 1997, Ms. Gustafson lived and worked in France. Now, she is back in her native Washington, on Vashon Island in Puget Sound, but she still commutes to Paris for work. Her projects remain best known in Europe, and it is necessary to understand what she has done abroad in order to comprehend her vocabulary for the museum terrace, which is only beginning to take shape.

Ms. Gustafson's esthetic veers toward abstract and minimalist forms, and was shaped in France by her mentors there, including the well-known landscape architect Jacques Sgard ("I never drew a curve before

I worked with him"), the sculptor Igor Mitoraj ("He gave me the tools to sculpt my clay models") and Peter Rice, structural engineer of the Pompidou Center. Walks among the systematic beds and the glasshouses of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris influenced her planting designs.

What has evolved is a vision of landscape as an immense canvas to shape and manipulate. Ms. Gustafson takes into consideration the movement of people through these spaces and the environment beyond: not only buildings, but also shifting sunlight and shadows throughout the day or, at night, landscapes made vivid by her lighting design.

Since 1980, she has been involved in three dozen important public

A design with a metaphorical link.

projects: town squares, corporate landscapes and city parks. The Parc de la Villette, in Paris, is on her roster, as are a number of projects for corporations and governments.

In the summer of 1997, when the city of Lausanne, Switzerland, invited landscape architects to enhance its narrow streets and broad esplanades for an International Festival of Urban Gardens, Ms. Gustafson

redesigned the esplanade of Montbenon, an undefined expanse of lawn overlooking Lake Geneva. By placing swathes of silvery leaved plants next to long blue beds, she linked this plaza visually with the gray-blue waters and the Alps rising beyond. Then, with the composer François Paris, she suspended glass chimes and gongs from metal arches along the adjacent walkways. Their tinkling sounds were reminiscent of Swiss clock chimes.

A few months ago, Ms. Gustafson was in the London offices of Sir Norman Foster, the architect of the Great Glass House for Britain's newest botanic garden, the National Botanic Garden of Wales in Llanarthne. It will open next year. The

elliptical structure, 330 feet long, will be the largest single-span glasshouse in the world. Ms. Gustafson is designing the interior, best described as the Grand Canyon under a glass sky. With deep, sharply cut stone chasms and crevices, a 16-foot waterfall and a flood plain at the bottom, the landscape, to be planted with Mediterranean flora from the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, will be a milestone in botanic garden design.

But France has been her stronghold, especially the town of Rueil-Malmaison on the Seine, eight miles west of Paris, where several corporations have built new homes nestled among the quiet residential streets lined with linden trees. Those corporations wanted to add to, not detract

from, suburban neighborhoods already filled with gardens. Ms. Gustafson gave Shell Petroleum rolling green lawns that are bermed up against the headquarters building.

One can understand why she says, "I'd love to design a golf course." The lush lawns, separated by sharp-cornered limestone walls, are like a green lava flow.

Her complex designs for corporations are comparable in scope to gardens designed around palaces and chateaus in the 17th century, though her work is more the equivalent of that of contemporary landscape artists like Michael Heizer or James Turrell. Behind Shell's buildings, Ms. Gustafson switched from a bold to an intimate, almost domestic, scale. A canal cum water garden separates the two main buildings, which are joined by a series of glass-enclosed bridges. Along the water, plantings of dogwood, magnolia, azalea and rhododendron are arrayed in color patterns from white to purple. Along the canal, a low boardwalk with steel handrails barely skims the water.

In a simpler but no less elegant vein, Ms. Gustafson laid out a series of rills in marble troughs in front of the Esso headquarters just blocks away. The troughs stretch like ribbons of water between rolling lawns and a grove of willow trees. From each side, these channels empty into a shallow cascade that flows gently toward the Seine.

Her ideas about history, culture and memory are summed up in her park for the medieval town of Terrasson in the Dordogne. It redefines the meaning of gardens. On a steep hillside next to a 15th-century fortified abbey, Ms. Gustafson created what she describes as "history fragments of gardens" or what the town calls imaginary gardens. One mysterious feature of the park is how streams, fountains and cascades rush into the open — and just as quickly disappear. It is possible to walk through her forest of fountains there and, on a still day, not get wet.

Ms. Gustafson is also in tune with Paris, and with what makes it the City of Light. Driving by the Place de la Concorde one night, she pointed out how the numerous lampposts are placed at different heights. "If you squint your eyes," she said, "it is like driving through a galaxy of stars."



Claire de Virieu for The New York Times (above and inset)



Photographs by Paula Deitz



GARDEN ART Kathryn Gustafson is known in France for her bermed lawn for Shell Petroleum, above, and dancing waters, left, in Terrasson.