

# Gas Works Park

Seattle, Washington

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996

# Notes on the Making of the Photographs

There are a number of interpretations of the significance of this landmark project, which transformed a former gasification plant into a public park. Located on a promontory on the north shore of Lake Union in Seattle, Gas Works Park was designed by landscape architect Richard Haag beginning in 1970, opened in 1975, and is now on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>1</sup> It has been identified by historians, scholars, as well as other prominent landscape architects, as a master work of modern landscape architecture. Gas Works Park has been cited as an example of the following: the reuse of post-industrial landscapes, bio-remediation, embodiment of the sublime, non-striving Zen design, as well as shattering an almost universal attitude of how a park should look.<sup>2</sup>

The response to this landscape design, of course, varies because each individual's perception is from their own particular background and point of view, but how do you explain the range of such deeply felt emotions experienced at Gas Works Park? Perhaps it elicits such strong feelings because of the virtual intensity of its symbolic expression. It is an art form, a work of landscape architecture, that is vital, derived from preserved industrial artifacts, an earthen mound of reclaimed soil, and paths. It is a meaningful symbolic domain capable of multiple interpretations. With the preservation of industrial artifacts, something new has been created, it is a park set in a new order.<sup>3</sup>

1. See "Richard Haag Oral History," The Cultural Landscape Foundation

2. From essays, and quotes on the back of *Richard Haag: Bloedel Reserve and Gas Works Park*, William S. Saunders, editor, 1998

The great inspiration by Richard Haag was to preserve the relics of gas works. This preceded the conception of the total form, and set forth its outline, so that all that followed in developing the design, reinforces the commanding idea of "the powerful presence of the remaining towers of the vanished gas works."<sup>4</sup> Retaining the virtual space around these industrial artifacts was reinforced by making an open landscape with a consistent ground plane of a rolling lawn, an eighteen-meter high earthen mound of excavated soils rising above the lake, and paths traversing the site – all composed to retain the monumental presence of these remnants of the past.

Entering Gas Works Park, there is at first a certain predictive reliability and expectations in it being known as a park, which is overturned when confronted by large rusting towers, transformers, and pipelines. There are paths one would expect in a park, but these same paths can also be read as part of the circulation, once required for an industrial facility. There are few traditional park features, which makes Gas Works Park more evocative for what is not there - for the simplicity of a design composed of earth, water, and remnants of obsolete technologies. However, these few elements provoke aesthetic emotions because Haag's edits and additions have transformed a former industrial site into a significant new form, that is experienced subjectively in multiple ways.

3. See Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 1953

4. "Laurie Olin on Threats to Gas Works Park," The Cultural Landscape Foundation, Oct. 29, 2025

# Notes on the Making of the Photographs

As a photographer and as a student of the history of photography, I see beauty in images that illustrate the restraint and clarity of the design, that also have echoes and stories from the past. While there are noble virtues in a landscape of remediation - of a toxic, polluting gas plant turned into a popular public park, I see a simple beauty in the forms. This is not a new tendency; it is reminiscent of painters depicting isolated ruins in the landscape in the eighteenth century. The remains of abbeys depicted in many paintings were beautiful fragments and remnants in the landscape, that elicited memories of an earlier era, when those abbeys were the economic centers of medieval life. Likewise, the rusting artifacts at Gas Works recall the history of American industrialization. As ruins, they are poignant examples of the process of creative destruction, an essential by-product of risk taking in capitalism, the greatest generator of prosperity that human ingenuity has ever devised. Evocative images of these industrial remains can stir such thoughts about the past.

Modernism in architecture embraced forms of expression influenced by industrial materials and processes. Gas Works Park, by preservation, integrated industrial materials into a work of landscape architecture to make a simple, but striking juxtaposition of steel tanks and pipelines within a setting of shaped earth and lawns. They are reminiscent of the precise, modernist paintings and photographs by

Charles Sheeler of factories and ships, that are realistic, but also abstract, with minimalistic, geometric forms along the water of canals - framed by tanks, towers, and smoke stacks. At Gas Works Park, I admire the graduated tones of curving tanks and pipelines set against the light to dark tones of a clear Seattle sky, the light scraping across the textures of an earthen mound, while paths etch an accessible route up the constructed landform. As a total composition, the actual objects – pipes, tanks, etc., become something else, part of the symbolic ensemble. As a well-crafted work of art on the land, it is something that has emerged that was not there before.

The images of people on the mound and across the lawn give reference and human scale for the spaces in the park, that at times seem vast, extending south across Lake Union. They also depict how the park is used, but take note of the moments caught in action, as people seem inspired, as they partake of the panoramic views across Lake Union, fly a kite, or contemplate the Seattle skyline in the evening. It is the photographer's goal to make images that open the door for the viewer to get a glimpse of this range of experiences possible at Gas Works Park, and try to express in photographs the beauty, as well as some of the thoughts and emotions that come forward from this ground-breaking work of landscape architecture.

# List of Photographs

1. View south of north shore of Lake Union and downtown Seattle
2. Former coal unloading area at Lake Union
3. Seattle Gas Light Company natural gas generator towers
4. View to downtown Seattle between generator towers
5. Restricted area of site with natural gas generator towers
6. Pavilion adjacent to oil absorber and oil cooler towers
7. Path paralleling overhead pipelines between towers
8. View under pipelines to Lake Union
9. View east of pavilions and tanks
10. Path and generator towers
11. Earthen mound of excavated material
12. West side of earthen mound
13. Earthen mound and downtown Seattle
14. Paths and kite flying on mound
15. View in the evening of mound and downtown Seattle





































# Notes

## **Selected Publication of the Photographs:**

“Centennialscape,” *Landscape Architecture*, November 1999

Simo, Melanie, editor, *100 Years of Landscape Architecture: Some Patterns of a Century*, 1999

“Under the Sky: Landscapes of Industrial Excess: A thick sections approach to Gas Works Park,” by Thaisa Way, *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 2013

## **Exhibitions of the Photographs:**

“Luminous Landscapes: Photographs by Alan Ward” The National Building Museum, 2016

“American Designed Landscapes: Space and Light” Sarasota Center for Architecture, 2018

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