THE HEALER

IF NOT FOR CLARE COOPER MARCUS, WE MIGHT HAVE MISSED THE TONIC POWERS OF DESIGN.

BY BILL MARKEN, HONORARY ASLA

In the fall of 1969, armed with a new master's degree in city planning, Clare Cooper Marcus, Honorary ASLA, taught a class at the University of California, Berkeley, called "Social and Psychological Factors in Open Space Design" for the first time. Created for landscape architecture students, the course relied on research methods such as observations, interviews, and behavior mapping to explore the gap between what designers thought they were designing and how the users experienced and felt about the actual landscapes. If this was a radical, bottom-up approach to teaching landscape design, it was also, of course, a radical tradition-questioning time in Berkeley—with Vietnam war protests and gas masks on campus.

One student in that class was Mark Francis, FASLA, now past chair of landscape architecture at the University of California, Davis, who remembers Cooper Marcus as a demanding and inspiring teacher. He recently wrote, "Energized by the battles going on in the streets outside Wurster Hall, she and other social factors faculty [whom Danish architect Jan Gehl calls "the Berkeley gang," including Clare, Donald Appleyard, Chris Alexander, and Donlyn Lyndon] created a sense of endless possibility in us students. One weekend she invited a group of us to Bolinas. It turned out to be a full-blown Jungian retreat where we gathered in a circle on the floor exploring inner feelings, personal histories, and favorite childhood places—all to get students to realize that much of what we would design would come from this well of personal experience and memory. She had great respect for the power of design to improve ecological and human life."

Throughout a long, distinguished career, Cooper Marcus has continued to inspire, write, and teach about the power of place and design to affect and improve human life—especially, during the past two decades, about how landscapes can improve health and well-being. In 2010, she was made an honorary member of ASLA for "her pioneering research on the psychological and sociological aspects of design, particularly urban open space. Her work, including 25 years at the University of California, has influenced generations of landscape architects."

Cooper Marcus's own "well of personal experience and memory" gave her an early understanding of the transformative power of nature and open space. She grew up in England, and during the German blitz of London in World War II her family was evacuated to the countryside. As she recalls, her mother was depressed and her father off to war, and she roamed on her own, climbed trees, and raised rabbits—and learned that closeness with nature could create deep, transformative feelings.

She went on to receive a degree in cultural and historical geography from the University of London, then struck off for the United States, which seemed "exciting and adventurous" after the dark days of postwar England. After earning an M.A. in urban geography at the University of Nebraska, she landed in Berkeley in 1961. For her next master's, she wrote a case study of Easter Hill Village, a housing project in nearby Richmond. Its conclusion demonstrated the gap between the original goals of the designers and how the residents viewed the completed project.

Cooper Marcus credits her Easter Hill Village paper (published as a book in 1973) with launching her career. She remembers a professor saying, "You are asking questions no one else is asking. You should be teaching." From 1969 to 1994 she taught in Berkeley's departments of architecture and landscape architecture. Her field was social factors: how the environment affects social and psychological behavior and
MARCUS ASKED QUESTIONS NO ONE ELSE DID: WHY DO YOU COME TO THE GARDEN? HOW DO YOU FEEL HERE?

vice versa. And she called what she did “designing for user needs.” Her voluminous writings explored and revealed the importance of designing for people’s real needs and inner feelings. Her books included People Places, Nature as Healer, and Housing as if People Mattered, House as a Mirror of Self, published in 1995, appealed broadly enough to land her a spot on Oprah Winfrey’s television show.

A Second Chapter of Life

After taking early retirement from the University of California in 1994, Cooper Marcus shifted her focus and research methods to the design of healing gardens. With one of her former grad students, the landscape architect Marni Barnes, ASLA, Cooper Marcus secured a grant and began a research project studying the impact of four hospital gardens. She calls it “the first systemic postoccupancy evaluation study of hospital gardens in the United States.” Using visual analysis, behavior mapping, and user interviews, she again asked questions no one else did: Why do you come to the garden? How do you use it? How do you feel here? She had answers of her own. Undergoing treatment for cancer at that time, she was spending a good deal of time in hospitals herself. She observed her own reactions: feeling uplifted while waiting for treatment under a beautiful old oak at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Walnut Creek; feeling depressed while waiting in her car in the bleak parking lot of another hospital she also had to visit.

Among the study’s findings: Ninety percent of garden users experienced a positive change of mood after time spent outdoors.” The study added weight to the burgeoning awareness of the shortcomings of contemporary health care facilities. As Cooper Marcus wrote, “In past centuries, green nature, sunlight, and fresh air were seen as essential components of healing in settings ranging from medieval monastic infirmaries...to pavilion-style hospitals, asylums, and sanatoria of the 19th and early 20th centuries... From approximately 1950 to 1990, the therapeutic value of access to nature all but disappeared from hospitals in most western countries. High-rise hospitals built in the international style resembled corporate office buildings.”

The study by Cooper Marcus and Barnes “fired them up” about the untapped power of healing gardens and
MARCUS EMPHASIZES THE ROLE OF PLANTS IN HEALING GARDENS: "YOU WANT A GARDEN, NOT A PLAZA."

ABOVE
"Designer Deborah LeFrank considered all the complex needs of the frail elderly in her design for the Brigham Garden: smooth pathways wide enough for two wheelchairs to pass, a shaded path at the entry for programs and for those too frail to venture further, colorful plantings with familiar flowers and a concern for seasonal change, movable outdoor furniture, a simple landscape pathway system, niches for privacy, and views to the surrounding countryside over a low, split-rail fence." Cooper Marcus says.

IMAGE CREDIT
Courtesy LeFrank & Associates Ltd.

led to a much larger project. Publisher John Wiley & Sons commissioned Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations, 610 pages of history, theory, research, health outcomes, and advice for designers—today the book is still the bible on the subject. Cooper Marcus and Barnes edited the book and wrote about half of it, relying on experts for individual chapters (such as Robin Moore, Affiliate ASLA, on children’s gardens).

A major contributor to the book was Roger S. Ulrich, Honorary ASLA, the pioneering behavioral scientist who is a professor in the Department of Architecture and the Department of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning at Texas A&M University. Beginning with his 1984 paper in Science magazine called "View Through a Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery," Ulrich documented how experiencing nature offers health-related benefits to hospital patients. Cooper Marcus gives a great deal of credit to Ulrich and boils down his ground-breaking research like this: "His studies have shown that the heart rate of a patient goes down when experiencing a garden, which helps in the healing process by reducing stress. Experiencing a garden provides a degree of relief from physical symptoms or awareness of symptoms. It offers stress reduction and increased comfort. And it facilitates an improvement in overall sense of well-being and hopefulness, which can assist physical improvement."

Designing a Healing Garden
Cooper Marcus has visited more than 100 hospitals with outdoor spaces in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. She is not one to pull punches. Naomi Sachs, ASLA, another former student and founder of the Therapeutic Landscapes Network (www.healinglandscapes.org), says, "Clare has taken evidence-based design to a new level. If something doesn’t work, she will say so—even if it makes the designer mad." Cooper Marcus stresses that a landscape designed for healing should be a respite—welcoming, comfortable, homey. She says, "People appreciate traditional garden elements such as lawns, trees, and flowers. Most people take comfort from a garden that is familiar—something like an English strolling garden." Her typical advice for designing for a health care setting: "Don’t push the envelope—no grass with granite stripes or benches without backs." What do landscape architects say about that? She says, "They laugh, but I think they agree."

Cooper Marcus emphasizes the role of plants in designing a healing garden. "Plants provide the all-important distraction of nature. You want a garden, not a plaza." As a rule of thumb, she suggests a 7:3 ratio of plants to landscape. She adds, "Designing for a health care setting is the opposite of designing a freeway planting. A healing landscape is not viewed while going 65 miles per hour. It is seen up close by someone who is ill or elderly and probably moving slowly. Intricate designs can be eye catching. Use different types of plants of different sizes, heights, leaf textures. Use flowers for their color."
MOVING WATER ATTRACTS BIRDS, COOPER MARCUS SAYS, AND "BIRDS DELIVER AN UNSAID MESSAGE: LIFE GOES ON."

outside, and is inviting to patients in wheelchairs as well as family groups. The Alzheimer's garden in the Garden of the Family Life Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan, designed by landscape architect Martha Tyson, has a pathway system designed for minimal confusion, a comfortable gazebo, and old-fashioned perennials that resonate with the elderly.

With the trend today toward patient-specific gardens, which incorporate special features for patients with certain conditions and diseases, Cooper Marcus considers it even more imperative that landscape architects follow a rigorous design process that includes working closely with the hospital staff and medical team. She also thinks that more research must be done to determine the strengths and weaknesses of existing gardens built in the past 10 to 20 years. Naomi Sachs says, "Clare wants strict standards of postoccupancy evaluations for healing gardens. We're concerned about healing washing, a take-off on greenwashing that means doing surface things to make it look like you have designed a healing garden but really haven't."

Clare Cooper Marcus Today

Now in the fifth decade of her career, Cooper Marcus has had a busy year. This past spring, she again lectured at the Chicago Botanic Garden, where, along with landscape architect Jack Carman, FASLA, and horticultural therapist Candice Shoemaker, she launched a weekend program that trains landscape architects and offers a certificate in health care design.

In the summer she spent several weeks on the remote Scottish island of Iona, which she has visited almost annually since 1979. Her latest book, Iona Dreaming: The Healing Power of Place, published in April 2010, is a contemplative memoir that reveals her talent to write soulfully and scientifically as she explores her own deep feelings: "I have to experience it [the mystery of Iona] in my sinews, breathe it into my body, absorb it through my ears and eyes." The book describes the personal process of physical and emotional healing that she went through as she recovered from a life-threatening illness. She calls Iona "the kind of place where one can relax to a deep level, which can strengthen one's immune system and have measurable success on physical health."

This past fall, on a crisp, sunny day, I met Cooper Marcus at her shingle-clad, two-story house on a quiet Berkeley street lined with mature camphor and London plane trees. From her front porch she can observe neighborhood life and greet passersby. Two or three blocks away are the cafes, laundry, markets, and public transit of College Avenue. The walkable, human-scaled neighborhood is what she and her late ex-husband Stephen were looking for when they settled there in 1974. She wanted her two children to grow up with the sense of independence and free-spiritedness that she experienced—her friends were aghast to see her son riding Bay Area Rapid Transit alone at age eight.

She took me for a walk on the Berkeley campus a few blocks away, revisiting many of the spots she observed and surveyed in People Places, published in 1990 as a guide to using "human behavior or social activities to inform
HER PERSONAL ESCAPE IS SCOTLAND’S ISLE OF IONA, “WHERE ONE CAN RELAX TO A DEEP LEVEL.”

and shape the designed environment.” Vigorous and tall, dignified with short gray hair and wire-rim glasses, she is the image of the scholarly and sensible retired academic—although her memoir reveals a certain amount of chalk-it-up-to-Berkeley experimenting along the way. First stop was Wurster Hall, the 1964 minimalist style (“brutalist to some) home to Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design, where she had an office for years. We entered through the courtyard at the back. Cooper Marcus called its original design “awful” for its uninviting asphalt paving and messy olive trees. She prefers the redesign that now exists, with brick paving, movable seating, lath screening for posting student work, and a patch of lawn. Seemingly on cue, three students in shorts set up a croquet game on the grass. She exclaimed, “That’s a perfect backyard—perfect for ‘family’ events like a graduation or small party.” She led the way to the building’s entry, which she calls the “front porch.” “This front porch is not beautiful, but it attracts students with built-in tables and seating and places to gather in social eddies off the main walkway.” That day it was busy with students studying, eating, and conversing and watching others rush by. With Cooper Marcus the terminology is humanistic, often related to the home (we also viewed Wurster’s “front yard”—the lawns and oaks that stretch beyond a main pathway). And a design’s results are measured in how people use it and are affected by it.

Nearby, Faculty Glade has been measured to be “the most favorite place on campus” for its swath of lawn for lounging in shade or sun and the surrounding tall live oaks and redwoods creating a sheltered sense of retreat. The plaza around the Campanile, with formal paving squares and pollarded London plane trees, is less inviting and was occupied by just two students that day. Cooper Marcus finds the formality off-putting but admits that may be owing to the “traditionally cool feelings the English have for French aesthetics.” (She also doesn’t like the pruning method used on the trees—“too aggressive, and too much a demonstration of humans trying to control nature.”) She admires the Bechtel Engineering Center’s roof terrace for its amenities: ATM, café, outdoor study nooks with overhead shade, and glass walls for wind protection. “Here someone listened to the students. They always say they want tables and chairs and other places to study outdoors.” The terrace was designed by George Matsumoto with Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey.

Cooper Marcus is quick to answer the question, why should designers concern themselves about the spaces between the buildings on a 35,000-student campus? “Well-designed spaces where students can relax and gather with other students or even faculty can encourage casual social encounters and a richer college experience. And school can become more than lectures and libraries.”

Later that day, Cooper Marcus would attend a session of her writing group, in which she is concentrating on poetry, with nature-related work including titles such as “The Fence” and “Rainy Afternoon in My Neighborhood.” At the end of the week she would speak in Las Vegas on “Researching Restorative Landscapes in Health Care,” continuing to spread the word to a convention that drew 3,400 health care designers and other professionals on the power of places—especially people places—to inspire and heal the spirits and body.