

# The Creation of *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup>: An International Network of Interactive Life Frames

Bonnie Sherk

**P**eople of all ages can participate in interactive indoor/outdoor culture-ecology parks called Life Frames, which are designed in site- and situation-sensitive ways to integrate the local resources of a particular area: human, ecological, economic, historic, aesthetic and technological. Each of these Life Frames will bring to life the culture and ecology of a place through the use of plants and other living forms; all the arts; built and ecological environments; programs of lectures, demonstrations, research institutes and workshops; and state-of-the-art communications technologies.

Each environment with its integrated program will have a unique relationship to the indigenous resources and characteristics of the locale and its people, and the linking together of the individual Life Frames (which can also be thought of as branch libraries) will create an extraordinary international network—*A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> [1]. Each will consist of intellectually and visually exciting interactive learning/creating environments that give people practical as well as cognitive and sensory experience, stimulate and support creativity and choice, and motivate people to want to learn—so that they *can* learn.

*A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup>, as it grows and matures, will reflect the rich multicultural and ecological diversity of the planet. Locally, each Life Frame will serve its community as an educational, cultural, social and aesthetic magnet, a place integrated with a thematic program and curricula, and will involve students, artists, scientists and others in its creation, use, maintenance and communication.

The park, plaza, museum, university campus, schoolyard, corporate headquarters, shopping mall or other public or private indoor/outdoor open space will become a living, learning laboratory, a magnet, bringing together many sec-

tors of the community: students of all ages, teachers of all subjects, artists of all persuasions, historians, futurists, businesspeople, media technologists, scientists, environmentalists, horticulturists, families, corporations, senior citizens, foreign dignitaries, and others—all in a celebration of learning, creating and maintaining the environment. The public open space will also become the site for live interactive broadcasts allowing for unusual on-line interchange between the many Life Frames around the world.

At the local level, resources will be integrated so that they work better together. School curricula, for example, can be linked to the park to include research, creation, use and maintenance of the Life Frame. Corporations that wish to play a more active role in the larger community and provide unique educational experiences for their employees and their families can also participate through sponsorship or program content development as it relates to their industry. *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> and its individual branches may even become a new art venue—the gallery or museum of the future.

At the national and international level, communities will exchange cultural and ecological information. Figure 1 shows two different potential locales for *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup>. The sketch shows only a few elements of the proposed interactive program and environment and is meant to suggest a only a few possibilities using new communications technologies. On the left, we see an interactive park environment near an urban setting, possibly somewhere in Asia. On the right, we are in an interactive park setting near some mountains. The two sites are linked programmatically in a variety of ways through various on-line computer and video technologies.

- A giant round video screen in the locale on the right shows a group of people watching images of the procession occurring on the left.
- Some of the people in the left-hand locale are also able

Fig. 1. Theresa Cheney with Bonnie Sherk, *A Living Library*—Sketch of Interactive Locales, drawing, 11 × 17 in, 1989.



Bonnie Sherk (environmental sculptor, planner, designer and educator), 32 Cornelia Street, Suite 5C, New York, NY 10014, U.S.A. Tel: 212-242-1700.

Received 31 October 1989.

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses an evolving project called *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup>, which will be an international electronically linked network of indoor/outdoor culture-ecology parks integrated with programs and curricula called Life Frames. This network will promote learning, creativity and communication while helping people to develop an ecological consciousness and multicultural sensitivity and encouraging them to share resources and information.

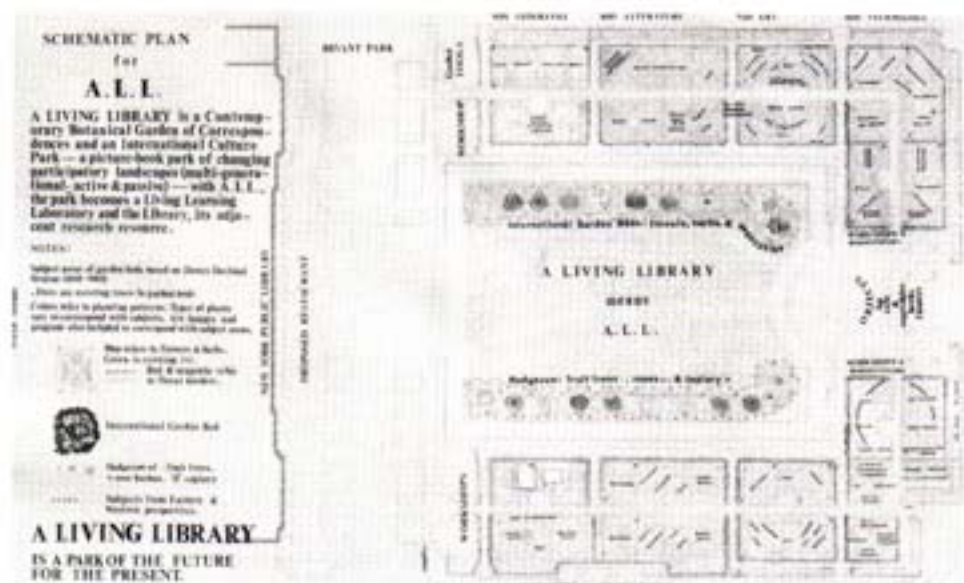


Fig. 2. Bonnie Sherk, schematic site plan for *A Living Library* in Bryant Park, drawing, 24 × 36 in, 1983.



Fig. 3. Bonnie Sherk with other participating artists and school-children, *A Garden of Knowledge*, mixed media, 20 × 20 × 13 ft, 1986. Mini-demonstration for *A Living Library*. Shown here, view east, Central Hall Gallery, SoHo, New York. (Photo: Bob Jeffords)

to watch the performance occurring in the upper right locale on the 'Video Parasol'.

- The locale on the right shows interactive touch/sound/voice-activated screens embedded in the 'Video Computer Hedgerow' and a blow-up of hands on a screen in the foreground.
- The lower right-hand corner of the drawing shows a group of people gardening. Details of this activity appear in the 'Tree Video Gate' framing the picture on the upper right.

As a model for the urban park of the future, *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> is part of a larger concept of park and urban design that formulates creative cost-effective solutions to traditional problems

plaguing not only parks but also society at large, through the integration of diverse human, technological and ecological resources. Some issues that *A Living Library* addresses are:

- Healing the fragmentation of modern living and education by demonstrating connections between biological, cultural and technological systems and by linking varied community resources.
- Promoting a more profound understanding and appreciation of cultures around the world.
- Creating a sensitive balance between technology and nonmechanized nature.
- Developing new approaches to civic management, park maintenance and problems of vandalism.

- Proposing alternatives to the business-as-usual approach to environmental transformation, which is often merely cosmetic, unecological and overly expensive.
- Creating innovative solutions for locating monies for the operation of public-oriented projects such as parks.

It is projected that by 1992, to celebrate Columbus's landing in the New World—and to commemorate the Native Americans already there—a few Life Frames will be in place to demonstrate our evolving commitment to and vision of the 'New World'. To date, many communities and institutions from Indiana, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Maryland, New York, Oregon, Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Denmark and Holland are exploring ways of becoming part of this vital new international culture-ecology *Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> network [2].

## HISTORY OF A LIVING LIBRARY

*A Living Library* was initially inspired by and designed for Bryant Park, a site in the middle of New York City adjacent to the Main Branch of the New York Public Library. In 1981 Bryant Park suffered from many of the urban problems common to public open spaces: it was an underutilized, derelict and vandalized environment inhabited primarily by drug dealers and drifters. *A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> was envisioned as an international culture park that would relate to the Main Library, to its location in the center of New York City, and to New York's international diversity and role as a world leader in communications and culture.

*A Living Library*<sup>TM</sup> here would have 'Gardens of Knowledge' arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System: a Generalities Garden, a Religion Garden, a Philosophy Garden, a Social Sciences Garden, a Language Garden, a Science Garden, a Technology Garden, a Garden of the Arts, a Literature Garden and a History and Geography Garden—10 in all (Fig. 2).

Each garden of knowledge would contain live plants corresponding to its subject. Plants have different cultural meanings as well as botanical, medicinal and economic values. There would be visual artworks relating to the subject, as well as a program of lectures, demonstrations, workshops and per-

Fig. 4. Bonnie Sherk, *Public Lunch*, performance piece, 1971. The Lion House at the San Francisco Zoo, feeding time 2 P.M. The performance showed the human figure as an analogy to the tigers and lions, each an object on view eating a meal. Because the human is a woman there is an added feminist perspective of the woman as an object on view. The human meal was catered by Vanessi's Restaurant; the other animals ate raw meat. Inside the human's cage was another cage containing a rat. The cage within a cage implied the possibility that the audience was also in a cage. The piece was meant to be viewed frontally as in a proscenium theater with the adjacent cages seen as analogous Life Frames and the resulting photographic documents as individual Life Frames, still lifes or scenes. (Photo: Vincente Saval)



forming artworks, all connected thematically. There also would be research institutes developed in conjunction with schools, from kindergarten through college. Interactive computer, television and telecommunications capabilities would link the park electronically to other Life Frames throughout the world. And International Garden Beds would demonstrate various styles and methods of gardening from different cultures around the world, involving the many consulates and embassies in New York City.

For the Bryant Park program design, there are three main aspects of *A Living Library*<sup>™</sup>, each of which involves a professional staff of experts and volunteers who are also educators. First there is the created form, which involves the research institutes and students, artists and others. Next is the way it is maintained through programming involving a multi-generational public in its planting, nurturing and upkeep. The third aspect is the way it is used by visitors—only a few of the many possibilities are as a refreshing respite from the city; as an outdoor community and international information center; and as a place to hear a special lecture or concert.

For example, in terms of its creation, the changing seasonal themes of the park would be developed in conjunction with leading experts and educators in the area. In addition to involving professional artists, historians, ecologists and media technologists, the programs of the park would relate to the curricula of schools—elementary, secondary and college. Students would be involved in the creation of programs and could choose their special area of

concentration, whether it be literature, history, science or computer science. With expert staff guidance from the research institute, students could choose their form of expression: developing software, creating local multimedia databases, using other technological possibilities, creating different forms of artworks, or doing plant research for the gardens of the park, to name just a few possibilities.

Suddenly, abstract learning could have a practical application. This might affect the high high-school drop-out rate. With this kind of program, students might actually discover that they enjoy school and love learning. This has extraordinary implications for the future of education.

Unfortunately, Bryant Park turned out to be a difficult site in which to implement *A Living Library*<sup>™</sup>, due to complex political and real estate issues. The project will thus have to be initiated at some other location or locations; such a plan is under way.

### *A GARDEN OF KNOWLEDGE*

In 1985 a prototype of *A Living Library*<sup>™</sup> was created, a traveling environmental installation called *A Garden of Knowledge*. The exhibit was displayed in a gallery in SoHo (New York City) and was part of the Houston Festival and New Music America in Texas. The themes were the diversity of park and garden styles from different cultures and periods of history, and the cultural and symbolic meanings of plants. Many people, including students, artists, horticulturists, computer/video technologists and businesspeople, were involved

in the creation and implementation of *A Garden of Knowledge*. Many artists contributed their own personally symbolic flowers as artworks, and the live plants, contributed by local nurseries, were labeled with their symbolic meanings. Included in the installation was an electronic 'Tree of Knowledge' embedded with an interactive videodisk brimming with information on the history of international parks and gardens, plant symbolism, details on how the installation was created, information on *A Living Library*<sup>™</sup> and its many precedents in the history of world landscape architecture, a bibliography and other material. There was also an opportunity for the viewers to use computer graphics to create their own personally symbolic flowers and garden layouts while listening to a continuous soundtrack of birds, crickets and music from around the world (Fig. 3).

### EVOLUTION OF LIFE FRAMES

The term 'Life Frames' was first coined by me in the early 1970s to describe a visual and conceptual aspect of environmental performance art that I was creating. By the mid-1970s the individual performance had given way to a much more complex series of inter-related interactive programs involving many people participating for different reasons, not all of them specifically related to art in the pure, formal sense. As such, the Life Frame became a device that literally framed life so that we could see it and experience it better.

Earlier and simpler Life Frames dealt primarily with the performance con-

