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The Halprins in Motion

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"Driftwood Village—Community," Sea Ranch, California. Experiments in Environment Workshop, July 6, 1968.

Put away your tracing paper and charcoal pencils. Shut your books. Stop thinking. Put on a blindfold and go for a walk in the woods. Make a structure out of yourselves, human bodies. Catalog everything that you see, hear, feel, and smell. Build a city out of beachside driftwood in complete silence. Take off your clothes. Now start thinking about design.

You could call these instructions those of a thought experiment. They came from Anna and Lawrence Halprin's workshops, held in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s and 1970s. But that was not the point. The Halprins held weeks-long events that took landscape architects, architects, artists, and dancers to redwood forests, expansive beaches, and into the city of San Francisco and asked them to shed all theory and dogma so they could explore and interpret their environment totally through sensory experience.

A new exhibition at Chicago's Graham Foundation, up until Dec. 13, has assembled the Halprins' extensive documentation of their Experiments in Environment workshops. The show is done in conjunction with the University of Pennsylvania, where Halprin's archives are held. Put together in just months, *Experiments in Environment: The Halprin Workshops, 1966–1971* is the first ever serious exhibition into the Halprin workshops.

Lawrence Halprin wanted to teach the young people who flocked to him to take off their aesthetic lenses and stop thinking genres. In the mid-1960s, Halprin saw easy targets in big, single-author projects. "Chandigarh and Brasilia were the last gasp of that, I hope, and you see what bad cities they are," he told *Progressive Architecture*.

Anna Halprin was integral to the workshops. She pushed her husband to consider how bodies and their physiology interact with their environments in ways that move past assumptions so common they're nearly imperceptible. The couple's intensely symbiotic professional relationship lasted for 70 years (Lawrence Halprin died in 2009 at 93), yet this is the first time the two have been given equal billing in an exhibition. The dancers she brought to the workshops worked with the designers on equal footing, coming together to learn about the "architecture of the body," says Ellen Alderman, a co-curator of the exhibit and the Graham Foundation Managing Director of Public Programs.

The goal for these workshops seems to be about giving people a greater capacity to elicit emotions, sensations, and reactions in the spaces or art they make. Lawrence Halprin saw this goal as a fundamental difference between landscape architects and architects. From his *Notebooks 1959–1971*: "They make objects. We don't. We make experiences. We're not trying to find a form. The land is the form."

The exhibit focuses on three workshops, in 1966, 1968, and 1971, with text and photos documenting them, as well as Halprin's design projects used as settings for the workshops (the Sea Ranch and the Halprins' home in Kentfield, California) all in the downstairs galleries. Upstairs, slides and videos of the workshops are projected in a massive 1:1 scale, creating a visceral experience. "You almost have the effect of walking into them," says William Whitaker, an exhibit cocurator and the collections manager of the UPenn Architectural Archives.

The images are immersive and unforgettable. They exist on a spectrum of strange, sensual ritual. There is body paint slathered, psychedelic hippie debauchery, and quiet moments of reflection and isolation. They look like film stills from a discarded Roman Polanski feature. Piles of twisted and contorted bodies reach skyward in some obvious discomfort, and two women pray over a tree branch on a red blanket. Everyone is either tipping on the edge of orgiastic pleasure while also in searing pain, or entirely lost in a mediation with their environment. The schedule for each workshop was organized by a "score," delineating dates, times, and activities. A typical day's activities would introduce an experience, and then have participants document, discuss, and reflect on it, a basic structure that's gone on to influence connections to contemporary and performance art. It was democratic group collaboration, free-form exchange with no explicit, immediate goals. The central tension is that the direction and leadership came from a very centralized place: the Halprins. Very often, exercises would center on completing a task without the use of a certain sense (take a blindfolded walk in the woods), or communication (build a city of driftwood in silence). The Halprins told participants which senses to use, how to communicate, how not to communicate, and how to use their bodies.

Halprin didn't see himself as a puppet master. He insisted that artists and designers were "a community guide, NOT a form maker or 'hero figure,'" which puts him at odds with the exhibition's image of him standing, bearded and Moses-like, in a group of students, reading from the 13.5-foot-long score scroll that's a centerpiece of the Graham show. The Halprins thought interpreting one's environment is best accomplished through a raw, mythical journey of self-expression, but there are clear leaders at the head of the caravan.



"Market Street Walk," San Francisco. Experiments in Environment Workshop, July 8, 1966.

The Halprins' means for gathering information about their environment were creative, personal, and mystical. Today, community input has turned technocratic: social media, or websites such as Mindmixer and Kickstarter. What appears democratic may in fact be dictatorial. Any major public design project must survive endless community input meetings with every imaginable stakeholder.

On other cultural battlegrounds, the late 1960s brought the dissolution of International Style modernism, and the workshops can be seen as Lawrence's way of discarding its dogma. And then there is the chaos and social upheaval of the era. One photo, from an article in *Dance Magazine*, shows a group of students climbing over cars, splayed out on top of them, rushing past each other. If you look at the date, 1966, your first thought may be that they are fleeing a riot. They weren't. "They were probably creating one," Whitaker says. There's plenty of sexual-liberation hedonism as well (half a day is devoted to "nakedness") and the 1960s utopian sense that a new civilization could be founded on the explorations committed to by a small group.

These workshops didn't seek out contemporary culture at all, but the zeitgeist crept in. "They were all experiencing the breakdown, they were all working on that context," says Sarah Herda, Graham Foundation Director and exhibit cocurator. "In a way, the world was kind of falling apart."

Credit: "Driftwood Village—Community" and "Sea Ranch to San Francisco Score," Courtesy Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania; "Market Street Walk," Courtesy Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Photo by Joe Ehreth.

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