

WALKER ART CENTER

"The Poetry Garden" by Siah Armajani

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The Poetry Garden by Siah Armajani

Lisa Lyons

*There is another world inside this one—
no words, can describe it.
There is living, but no fear of death;
There is Spring, but never a turn to Autumn.
There are legends and stories
coming from the walls and ceilings.
Even the rocks and trees recite poetry.*

from *A World Inside This World*
by the 13th-century
Sufi poet Jallaluddin Rumi¹

In April 1989 Lannan Foundation moved into its new headquarters. Renovation of the modernist structure designed in 1968 by Los Angeles architect William Krisel for Feuer Corporation, an air systems assembly company, was far from complete. The offices were habitable, but it would be more than a year before the rest of the interior including the foundation's exhibition galleries, art storage spaces and libraries would be finished. Landscaping of the site had yet to begin, and a courtyard on the east side of the property was still undeveloped.²

On early renovation plans, the roughly 50 x 70-foot courtyard was labeled "Sculpture Garden," but precisely what that meant had not been defined when we settled into the offices. Feeling that we needed to study the space, we spruced up the dusty lot with a patch of sod surrounded by a path of decomposed granite. In the weeks to follow we spent a lot of time peering out the office windows into the "garden," and pacing around and across the lawn, talking about how it could best be used.

We contemplated various scenarios. The space could be an outdoor gallery for exhibitions of large-scale sculptures. To provide maximum flexibility, the courtyard would have to be as open as possible.



René Magritte
La chambre d'écoute 1952
The Menil Collection, Houston

Mulling over this plan, I conjured up a granite plaza with a bit of greenery around the perimeter and then mentally craned a single monumental sculpture into the space. There it stood, straining against the courtyard walls, bringing to mind that Magritte painting in which an apple has grown to fill an entire room.

There was something perversely appealing about this surrealistic tableau, but the novelty of such an installation would quickly wear thin. And in any case, we were heading into summer and each day as the sun rose in the sky, the temperature within the courtyard rose as well. Surely trees were needed for shade; but an arbor large enough to significantly lower the temperature and blinding mid-day light level in the courtyard would leave little room for sculptures, not to mention the seating and ancillary plantings necessary to create an inviting garden. The space was simply too small.



Lannan Foundation

We peered, we paced, we thought some more. We wondered: did the world need another sculpture garden? I like art, I like the outdoors, but I have to admit that I've always found art and the outdoors to be a tricky combination. The examples of successful sculpture gardens are few, and the best of these are not modestly scaled sites like the Lannan courtyard, but expansive parks. The worst of them . . . well, the worst of them seem to fall into two categories: there are those in which the sculptures look like captive specimens that have been forcibly removed from their natural habitats and set into artificial environments imbued with all the terminally cute charms of a petting zoo; and there are those in which the sculp-

tures look like meteors that have landed *plop!* from outer space onto stark, De Chiricoesque plazas.

Perhaps the world didn't need another sculpture garden after all, but a garden of some kind still seemed like a good idea, especially given the foundation's location in an industrial office park between Marina del Rey and Los Angeles International Airport. A suburban neighborhood of nondescript warehouses and boxy, tilt-up structures occupied by a variety of businesses, the area is pleasant enough. When we moved into the building, however, there were few public amenities—no green spaces and no restaurants, save the “roach coaches,” rolling kitchens like Steve's Stove that pull up throughout the day on street corners and parking lots, attracting a loyal clientele of hungry workers who queue up to order a burger

or a burrito or to grab a Snickers bar to be eaten back at a desk.

We began to think about the courtyard as a kind of vest-pocket park, a lunch and coffee-break haven for our nine-to-five neighbors, and a place for our gallery visitors to contemplate the exhibitions or to read a catalogue or brochure. A place to sit and talk and read.

Reading. That was the key. Although best known as a visual arts organization, by 1989 Lannan Foundation had begun to develop a reputation for its sponsorship of contemporary literature as well. In fact, literature had always been a passion of the late J. Patrick Lannan, who established the foundation in 1960. In addition to assembling an extensive collection of contemporary art that was to become the basis of our exhibition program in Los Angeles, he was a major benefactor of *Poetry* magazine and chairman of the board of The Modern

Poetry Association for more than 30 years. Through the grant programs that have been instituted since Mr. Lannan's death, the foundation now supports not only museums, university galleries and alternative spaces, but also writers and literary organizations.

A new plan blossomed: Lannan would commission an artist to design a garden that embodied the foundation's commitment to both art and literature. *The Poetry Garden*, as we began to call it, would serve as a retreat for our gallery visitors and neighbors, and it would be the site of literary events as well.

The choice of an artist to design such a space seemed obvious. As one of the most highly regarded creators and theorists of public art in America, and as a man with a deep and abiding interest in literature, Siah Armajani was uniquely qualified for the job.

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1 Published in Jonathan Star and Shahram Shiva, *A Garden Beyond Paradise: The Mystical Poetry of Rumi* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p 144.

2 The master plan for the building renovation was developed by Miami, Florida architect Mark Hampton in consultation with William Krisel. The courtyard was created by erecting tall walls around a parking lot abutting the building.

Siah Armajani is a pioneer among those contemporary artists who have devoted themselves almost exclusively to undertaking projects in public spaces. Indeed, in his work of the past two decades, he has helped to redefine the very concept of public art. Armajani has little interest in producing monumental sculptures; rather, he creates works that he describes as “low, common and near to the people.”³ Among his projects are a lecture hall in Philadelphia, a bandstand in Mitchell, South Dakota, pedestrian bridges in Minneapolis and Stuttgart, and a waterfront promenade in lower Manhattan. “I am interested in the nobility of usefulness,” he has said. “My intention is to build open, available, useful, common, public gathering places. Gathering places that are neighborly. They are not conceived in terms of wood and steel but in terms of their nature as places at hand, ready to be used.”⁴

In one of life’s little ironies, the designer of some of the most successful public spaces produced in the late 20th century is an extremely private man. Armajani lives with his wife Barbara in a quiet neighborhood in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and works across the Mississippi River on the northern edge of downtown Minneapolis in an unprepossessing building that formerly housed a laminating company. His enthusiasm for art is boundless, but he has little interest in the social side of the international art world in which he is an increasingly respected figure. He

is a modest man who shuns the spotlight and who firmly believes that “. . . in public art, there is no room for focus on the ego. You have to get lost in the context of the work.”⁵

A populist in outlook and practice, given his druthers at lunchtime Armajani will often opt for McDonald’s, declaring the fast-food fare to be, to use his favorite expression of enthusiasm, “fantastic, honest!” That’s not to say that Armajani is an unsophisticated man or is in any way lacking in social graces. A charming individual, who projects a kind of old-world civility, he is a warm and generous host, no doubt a reflection of his upbringing in Iran where the rituals of hospitality have been developed into something of an art form. Visitors to his studio are inevitably met with offers of coffee and tea; and a plate carefully laid in advance of his guests’ arrival with pastries, cookies or chocolates is brought out from the back room. To refuse to partake of the sweets is to be barraged by a good-natured onslaught of polite protestations: “They are wonderful, honest! Please, you should try. Are you sure? Go on. You’ll have some? Fantastic!”

The third of four children, Armajani was born and raised in Tehran. His father, Aga Khan Armajani, was a successful merchant. A learned and genteel

man, he had studied at a Presbyterian missionary school where most of the teachers were American, and he developed an admiration for the United States that he passed on to his children.⁶

Although his family practiced Christianity, and Armajani and his siblings were steeped in Western ways at the local missionary school, they were also involved in the traditional Islamic culture of Iran.⁷ Armajani recalls his family home as a comfortable, book-filled environment where his father read Persian poems—particularly those of the great Sufi mystics—to the children every evening. “Poets are venerated in Persian culture,” Armajani told me recently. “Let’s say two men are having an argument. A third man comes along and is asked his opinion. He replies, ‘As the poet says . . . ,’ and that finishes it off. It’s settled. The poets always have the truth. You know, in Iran, poets were the only ones who were allowed to voice political and social protest. If you expressed yourself in prose, you got arrested. If you expressed yourself in poetry, no one would touch you.”

Armajani says that he always knew he was going to be an artist. As a child he spent six months studying painting and calligraphy with a strict, humorless instructor who whacked him on the knuckles with a ruler whenever he made a mistake. “He was a miserable human being who hated children,” Armajani

recalls. “I was seven or eight years old, and he gave me a gigantic number 12 brush and a well of ink and told me to draw miniatures, which was, of course, impossible. Then he told me that I had absolutely no talent whatsoever and that he had agreed to take me on only out of respect for my father.”

In high school Armajani developed an interest in politics, and like many of his fellow students he was ardently opposed to the Shah and his corrupt regime. His political beliefs were also shaped by reading Western philosophy, particularly the writings of the great thinkers of the German school, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

In 1960 Armajani’s family sent him to study at Macalaster College, a small liberal-arts school in Saint Paul where his uncle Yahya was a history professor. He majored in philosophy and minored in pure mathematics. As a child, Armajani had been instilled by his father with a reverence

3 Siah Armajani in a public discussion with Cesar Pelli at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 22 January 1986. (A notable exception to Armajani’s preference for the low, is his recently unveiled design for the majestic structure that will house the Olympic flame at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. It features a 132-foot-tall tower surmounted by a 16-foot-high cauldron. The tower will be connected to the top level of the Olympic stadium by a 190-foot-long bridge.)

4 Ibid.

5 The artist, quoted in Calvin Tomkins, “Profiles—Siah Armajani—Open, Available, Useful,” *The New Yorker*, 19 March 1990, p 49. (N.B.: Tomkins’ article provides considerable biographical information on the artist and valuable insight into the development of his philosophy.)

6 Tomkins, p 51.

7 Ibid.

for American democracy; now he embraced Mid-western populist thinking, taking as one of his heroes Hubert Humphrey, who had taught at Macalaster and was a good friend of his uncle.⁸

Armajani's intention to become an artist persisted. After graduating from college in the spring of 1963, he rented a loft in downtown Minneapolis where he continued to work on a series of "poem paintings" that he had begun at Macalaster: large white canvases completely covered with lines of Persian poetry inscribed in black ink. He also spent time in the computer lab at the University of Minnesota where he experimented with numerical progressions and conceptual projects, many of which reveal Armajani's delightfully absurdist sense of humor. For example, he designed a tower that would cast a 360-mile-long shadow, across the entire state of North Dakota. The tower would be 18 miles high and its tip would be two miles in diameter.

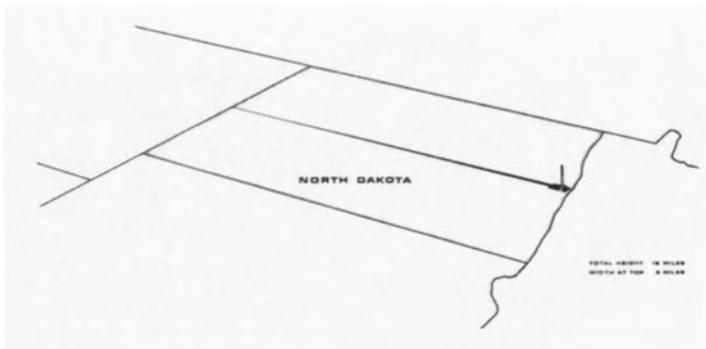
In 1967 Armajani became a United States citizen. To get a better understanding of how his new homeland had developed, he immersed himself in the study of American building styles from simple log cabins to Thomas Jefferson's sophisticated designs for Monticello.⁹ He hoped to use vernacular American architecture as the point of departure for a socially relevant art, like that of the early-20th-century Russian Constructivists El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin whose efforts he greatly admired.

Armajani developed his ideas in the classrooms of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where he taught from 1968 until 1974. He quickly earned a reputation as a charismatic speaker, and his lectures, extended discourses on topics ranging from art and architecture to anti-authoritarian politics and philosophy, peppered with Sufi parables and poems, were packed with eager students.

Meanwhile, back in the studio, Armajani was designing crudely carpentered sculptures that reflected his interests in architecture and Conceptualism. Among his earliest mature works was *First Bridge*, 1968. Developed as a table-top model and then built to full scale in a field in White Bear Lake, a small town 20 miles north of Saint Paul, the 125-foot-long covered wooden bridge was intended to give literal, physical form to an otherwise strictly visual, perceptual phenomenon. When you stand at one end of a covered bridge, the far end always looks smaller. But the far end of *First Bridge* actually was smaller. The bridge's height gradually diminished along the span's length from 10 to four feet, a fact that was not evident until unsuspecting viewers walked halfway across the bridge and grazed their heads on the roof beams.

⁸ Ibid, p 53.

⁹ Ibid, p 55.

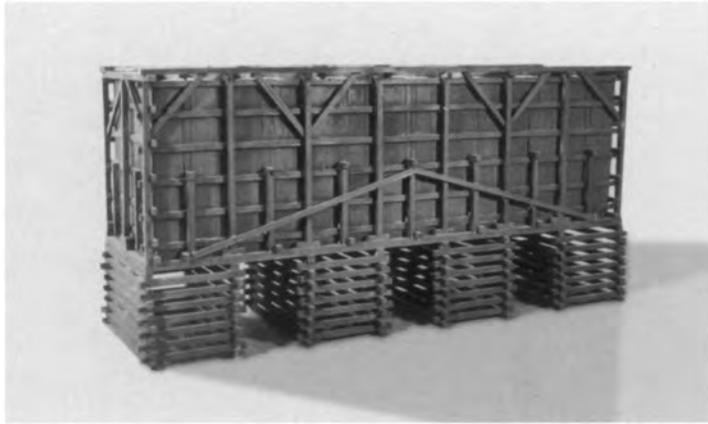


North Dakota Tower 1968
ink on paper
Collection of the artist



First Bridge 1968
White Bear Lake, Minnesota
painted wood
(destroyed)





House with Base (model) 1969
stained balsa
Private collection



Dictionary for Building 1974-75
cardboard and balsa
Courtesy of Max Protetch Gallery



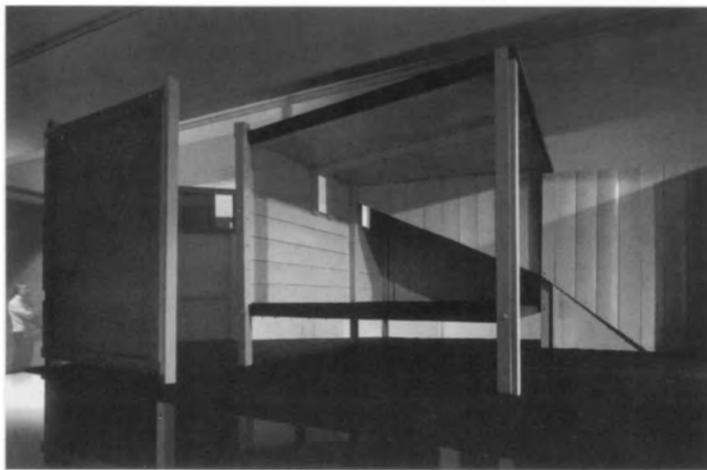
Back Porch with Picnic Table 1985
maple, cedar and pine with paint, stain,
bronze aluminum screen
Collection of Lannan Foundation

Houses were also part of Armajani's early sculptural repertoire, and he pursued his conceptual investigations in models whose walls, ceilings, floors, windows and doors occupied unexpected positions and met at odd angles. In essence, Armajani was "deconstructing" the platonic American house, examining its individual elements and reconfiguring them in an attempt to decipher what was peculiarly American about it. Occasionally, however, foreign influences crashed the domestic gates of Armajani's houses, creating curious, hybrid structures in which the ghosts of the Russian revolution encounter the spirit of the American industrial revolution. With its narrow lath walls and precipitously sloping roof, *House #5*, for example, suggests a corn crib designed by a Constructivist, fused with a lean-to dwelling of the kind commonly found in 19th-century Pennsylvania mining communities. Other models are only provisionally houses. A trussed, windowless and doorless structure supported by four slatted cubes resembling farm animal pens, *House with Base* looks more like a railroad trestle, or the cattle car that might pass over it, than any human habitation. When asked how these virtually impenetrable structures squared with his notion of an open, available and useful art, Armajani replied, "It is always through the idea of

the usefulness of an object that I become acquainted with it. This usefulness can be functional, or perceptual, or spiritual. It can provoke ideas without being functional."¹⁰

Armajani continued his forays into the conceptual no man's land between formalism and functionalism for nearly a decade by examining the architecture of Everyman in a series of nearly two thousand works begun in 1974 that he refers to collectively as the *Dictionary for Building*. Executed first as small cardboard models, many of which he later developed as freestanding sculptures fabricated of such standard building materials as painted wood, corrugated steel, stamped aluminum and glass, each is a study of an element of furniture or domestic architecture, presented alone or in relation to other elements to represent a spectrum of spatial conditions. The series begins with fairly simple, straightforward pieces like *Open Door—Closed Door*, moves on to more elaborate constructions, among them *Closet Under Landing* and *Basement Window Under Front Door Steps*, and culminates in 1985 in the expansive *Back Porch with Picnic Table*, a fanciful interpretation of a traditional Midwestern screened room.

¹⁰ The artist, quoted in Tomkins, p 59.



Thomas Jefferson's House: West Wing, Sunset House 1977
wood, corrugated steel, shingles,
enamel paint
Installation at Walker Art Center

At the same time that he began his index of art and architectural possibilities, Armajani was designing house-sized sculptures based on Jefferson's plans for Monticello. Among these was *Thomas Jefferson's House: West Wing, Sunset House*. Viewers entering this sprawling structure became participants in an environment where the eccentric positioning of walls and windows, staircases and ceilings directed attention not only to the

(often subverted) function of the architectural elements, but to their individual forms. For Armajani, the non-hierarchical nature of the structure, each of whose elements was given equal importance, was an allusion to the principles of Jeffersonian democracy.

Such references were likely lost on anyone not familiar with Armajani's agenda, and the artist for his part acknowledges that his pieces of this period "did not provoke people enough." Hoping, as he says, "to embrace viewers," in 1980 he began to incorporate texts in his works. The decision was brilliant, if not altogether surprising. "That is absolutely the influence of Persia, absolutely," Armajani says, referring to the centuries-old Persian architectural convention of decorating buildings with quotations from the Koran. Of course, his use of texts is also a reflection of the reverence for poetry he learned at his father's knee in Tehran and which he expressed in his early poem paintings.

Texts figure prominently in the public projects that have occupied Armajani since the early 1980s and with which he has achieved his vision of an open, available, useful art. Some, like the John Dewey quotation stenciled in capital letters high on the back wall of a three-sided pavilion in Armajani's 1980 *Meeting Garden*, are secular warnings expressed with the solemnities of biblical prophecy: AS LONG AS ART IS THE BEAUTY PARLOR OF CIVILIZATION, NEITHER ART NOR CIVILIZATION IS SECURE. More often, however, the quotes Armajani selects are more celebratory than cautionary, and in tune with his populist philosophy, many extol the transcendent beauty and intelligence of the commonplace. For *Reading*

Garden #3, constructed on a campus meadow at the State University of New York at Purchase in 1980, and again in *Office for Four*, commissioned by the Hudson River Museum in 1981, he chose the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: BEAUTY MUST COME BACK TO THE USEFUL ARTS, THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE FINE AND THE USEFUL ARTS MUST BE FORGOTTEN. IF HISTORY WERE TRULY TOLD, IF LIFE WERE NOBLY SPENT, IT WOULD NO LONGER BE EASY OR POSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH THE ONE FROM THE OTHER. For the *Louis Kahn Lecture Room* at the Samuel S. Fleischer Art Memorial in Philadelphia, it was Walt Whitman: WHEN THE MATERIALS ARE PREPARED AND READY, THE ARCHITECTS SHALL APPEAR. THE GREATEST AMONG THEM SHALL BE HE WHO BEST KNOWS YOU, AND ENCLOSES ALL AND IS FAITHFUL TO ALL. HE AND THE REST SHALL NOT FORGET YOU, THEY SHALL PERCEIVE THAT YOU ARE NOT AN IOTA LESS THAN THEY, YOU SHALL BE GLORIFIED IN THEM.

Whatever their subject, the quotes that grace Armajani's public works inevitably take on the quality of greetings, welcoming gestures extended to users of the sites. And reverberating in the mind, they infuse the visitors' experience with special meaning.







Meeting Garden 1980
Art Park
Lewistown, New York

Louis Kahn Lecture Room 1982
Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial
Philadelphia



World Financial Center 1989
 Cesar Pelli & Associates, architects
 M. Paul Friedberg & Partners, landscape architects
 Siah Armajani, Scott Burton, artists
 New York

This is nowhere more clearly evident than at the 3.5-acre waterfront plaza of the World Financial Center in lower Manhattan. Designed by Armajani in collaboration with the late sculptor Scott Burton, architect Cesar Pelli and landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, the plaza is among the most successful efforts in public art of this century, although, as critic Ken Johnson has noted, “. . . much of its aesthetic character exists below the perceptual threshold of a vision attuned to more traditional public-art expectations.”¹¹

The heart of the project is a seating area. Resting there on Burton-designed, granite settees, visitors survey a splendid metropolitan/maritime spectacle: to the east loom the towers of the World Financial Center; to the west is a private yacht harbor, beyond which ships sail the Hudson. Arcing along the waterfront is an Armajani-designed railing in which two quotes, spelled out in polished bronze letters, narrate the scene. At the south end is Walt Whitman’s delirious, “yawping” tribute to Manhattan: “City of the world (for all races are here, all the hands of the earth make contributions here;) City of the Sea! City of wharves and stores—city of tall facades of marble and iron: Proud and passionate city—mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!” To the north, Frank O’Hara pays his decidedly more plainspoken homage

to the town, with an ironic tip of the hat to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*: “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all that one wishes—I can’t even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there’s a subway handy or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life.” The words activate the space and the imagination. Reading them aloud, as visitors often do, you might feel yourself a player in an urban drama. Through the simple act of reading, you become a participant in the scene, not merely a witness to it.

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It was September 7, 1989, and Siah Armajani had just arrived in Los Angeles to inspect the courtyard at Lannan Foundation for the first time. I thought he would like the site, but he might not. So I steeled myself as I showed him to the door that leads outside from the galleries, and I waited for his reaction. Armajani had barely made it under the transom when he exclaimed: “It’s a God-given space!” And then he made a beeline for the far wall.

“It’s a wonderful space. It needs very little. It is almost finished, honest!” Armajani called out, as he walked excitedly around the empty courtyard. He carefully paced off the distance between the walls, then said, “Okay, I am done. Now we can go inside.”

“Go inside? Don’t you want to spend some more time out here, Siah?” I asked.

¹¹ Ken Johnson, “Poetry & Public Service,” *Art in America*, March 1990, p 162. (N.B.: Johnson’s article provides an excellent analysis of the plaza.)

He replied that he had seen enough for now. I was relieved that he liked the courtyard, but was dismayed that he had flown across the country only to spend a few minutes looking at it. Then I remembered something that Armajani had told me earlier: "I rarely visit sites because I do not see things three-dimensionally. I prefer to look at photographs and plans. I see nothing. You know, I was in Amsterdam for 10 days installing an exhibition of my work at the Stedelijk, and each day I took the same route from the hotel to the museum. Scott Burton came to Amsterdam for the opening, and as we walked together to the museum, he said to me, 'Siah, isn't that housing complex remarkable?' I asked him, 'What housing complex?' He stopped, looked at me like I was crazy and pointed to the buildings not more than five feet from where we were standing. I had passed them every day for 10 days, but I had never seen them."

Armajani and I walked inside. We would return to the courtyard later in the day—and we would send him home with numerous photographs and plans; in the meantime, there was much to discuss. My colleagues and I spent the day talking with Armajani about the garden and how it might be used.¹² It was an exhilarating brainstorming

session, the gist of which I recounted in a letter written to Laurence I. Shopmaker, then director of Max Protetch Gallery, Armajani's representative. This letter defined the conceptual basis of our commission agreement with the artist, and for that reason, I think it worthwhile to print it here virtually in its entirety:

Dear Larry,

As we have discussed by phone, my colleagues and I at Lannan Foundation are eager to move ahead on commissioning Siah to produce a "poetry garden" for our building . . .

At the time of Siah's visit here, we had not defined a formal design program for the garden, and to be honest, our thoughts about the project are still in the formative stages. We feel comfortable working in a collaborative manner with Siah on the development of the space. That said, let me tell you a bit about the basics of the space, and give you a long, rambling account of the notions that we discussed with Siah . . .

The site: The foundation building, a two-story, grey stucco, concrete and glass structure occupies a site on the southwest corner of McConnell Avenue and Coral Tree Place. The site for the garden is located at the northeast corner of the property. It is bounded on one side by the building, and on the other three by stucco walls—those on the street sides are roughly 24' high, the wall separating the garden from the employee parking lot is roughly 8' high.

The site is a semi-open, near rectangle measuring roughly 48 x 68 feet, with an additional dogleg area extending laterally along the foundation's building. There are two points of public access to the space: at the junction of the two tall walls that shield the site from the street, and through the building lobby . . .

The program—general comments:

We view the poetry garden as a space that will have two functions. First and most important of all, it should be designed specifically as a space to be used for public readings by poets and other writers. (It is conceivable that the space will also be used for other public gatherings including lectures, symposia and music performances. We view these latter events as secondary, and do not expect Siah's design "to be all things for all people.")

The vast majority of the time, the garden will not be used for readings. When the foundation's galleries are open to the public . . . the garden must function as a place where our visitors may sit, rest, contemplate, read. Therefore, the space should have a certain integrity and beauty all its own. It should never appear to be merely an empty theater awaiting the arrival of an audience. It should be a pleasant and inviting place to be even when "nothing is going on."

The program—some specifications: Here are some of the more important notions that we discussed with Siah:

A gate: We asked Siah to design a gate for the street entrance to the garden. Although we do not want the gate to bear the foundation's name, it should func-

tion as a kind of landmark for the building. On the practical side—the gate must be operable and be up to code (we have provided Siah with a list of code regulations). We view the gate as an integral part of the garden design, and not as an "add on."

A podium: The space should include a podium on which readers can place their materials. This podium could be fixed or moveable—but it should be a sculptural/functional element designed by the artist. It must include a light, since some of our readings will take place at night. On a related matter—we will explore the requirements of a sound system for the area. At this stage, we do not know if the podium design will have to include a microphone.

Seating: The space should contain a certain degree of fixed seating elements of the artist's own design, and should also accommodate the addition of other seating for those times when public readings are scheduled. At this point, we are not certain how large our audiences will be for these events, but suggest that Siah consider developing (fixed) seating to accommodate 50 people in the space. The additional seating could be of the artist's own design, or it could be seating that is commercially available . . . But whatever its origin, the seating should appear to have been selected especially for the space. It is imperative that this additional seating be comfortable, easily portable and easily stored.

Surfaces and landscaping: We are asking the artist to design the floor surfaces and

¹² Development of the garden program was a collaborative effort that involved the participation of the foundation's president J. Patrick Lannan, Jr.; Barbara A. Dalderis, the foundation's vice president and treasurer; Meghan Ferrill, who was then director of the foundation's literary programs; the author and the artist.



landscaping for the space. We will, of course, assist him with the selection of appropriate materials, but the overall design should be his. We envision the floor of the garden to be a combination of hard and soft surfaces. We imagine that a large portion of the space could be surfaced in stone or tile (particularly to accommodate the placement of seating for readings), and that a portion of it could be planted with grass, another ground cover, and flowers. We are open to planting a tree or trees in the space and to plantings that would cover portions of the walls. Unless it can be shown to be absolutely essential to the design, we would prefer not changing the grey color of the walls. Colorful plantings climbing the walls are not out of the question, however.

We would like the landscaping of the garden to tie into the exterior landscaping of the building. In fact, this "green belt" that runs along the Coral Tree and McConnell sides of the building, comprising several large eucalyptus trees and a ground cover of mondo grass, should be viewed as an extension of the garden site. The trees—which Siah liked quite a lot—are permanent elements. The mondo grass, if not compatible with Siah's vision of the garden landscaping, can be replaced and/or bolstered by other plant materials.

Lighting:
Lighting will have to be built into the space to accommodate readings held at night, and of course, for aesthetic and security purposes.

Themes:
Congruent with the garden's use, we are asking the artist to

incorporate in his design some literary references. Conceivably, quotes could be incorporated into the gate, podium, seating or other sculptural elements of the design, and possibly applied to the existing walls and/or embedded in the garden floor. We are open to Siah's thoughts on the selection of the literary themes, but would like to work with him on the final choice of these. We are open, as well, to the idea of commissioning a writer to produce a poem specifically to be incorporated into the design of the garden.

Misc.:
Although L.A.'s weather is lovely most of the year, the late afternoon and evening hours during the winter can be cool. For readings held at those times, we will probably want to provide some space heaters—most likely the kind of portable braziers used on restaurant terraces here. The garden design should allow for the placement of these And on a gustatory note: we talked with Siah about including in his design, or at the very least allowing space for a large table where the proverbial wine and cheese reception stuff could be placed.

Larry, we talked with Siah about a great many other issues . . . but I think I've covered all the important issues here. I trust that on the basis of the foregoing, you will be able to draw up an agreement to cover our working relationship on this project

I had fancied Lannan Foundation to be a model client and the courtyard commission to be something of a plum. However, considering the various uses we felt the garden should accommodate, and the numerous ideas and

design elements that we asked Armajani to pack into the small space, it's remarkable that he agreed to accept the job.

Moreover, at the time that we approached him about the garden commission, Armajani had become disillusioned with public art projects that involve collaboration. "The idea of a design team just doesn't work," he told Calvin Tomkins in the spring of 1989 after having completed the World Financial Center Plaza. "Cesar and Scotty and I went through a lot together, and we came to understand each other very well, but the kind of design team that just gets together around a table is like a situation comedy. It's cynical and unproductive. Genuine debate can't take place around a table that way The whole emphasis in most of those projects is on who can get along best with the others involved—at the expense of vision and fresh thinking."¹³

We recognized that taking a collaborative approach to the design of a space as small as the Lannan courtyard was neither necessary nor altogether desirable. It was agreed, therefore, that once we had developed the program for the space, it was Armajani's vision of the program that would be pursued; everyone else involved in the project would support and facilitate the realization of that vision. Consequently, the architect, the landscape architect and the others whose talents would

be enlisted along the way were to serve as consultants to, rather than as collaborators with, the artist.

Armajani had worked in this way with excellent results on two large commissions in Minnesota: the *Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge*, a magnificent 456-foot-long pedestrian bridge that traverses a 16-lane highway between the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden and Loring Park; and *Covered Walkway*, a 695-foot-long steel, wood and glass structure commissioned by General Mills to shelter employees as they make the trek between their offices and the distant parking lots. The success of these works is due in good measure to the fact that Armajani held control over their design and fabrication. The effects of that control are subtle, but powerful. Strolling through these long passageways, you soon become aware of the abundance of carefully considered details that characterize virtually every aspect of their construction and that make them work as art—and as something far richer than design. Without a whiff of pompous individuality, the bridge and walkway each manage to convey the artist's intentions and sensibility to a degree rarely found in public art works of this scale and complexity.

Following his initial trip to Los Angeles, Armajani spent several months developing a plan for the Lannan courtyard. When I visited his studio in the spring of 1990, he was busy

¹³ The artist, quoted in Tomkins, p 71.



Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge 1988
Minneapolis Sculpture Garden

at work on a scale model of the garden. Far from being a slickly crafted maquette, it was a rough-and-ready affair with an energetic, collage-like quality reminiscent of the models for his earliest *Dictionary for Building* pieces. Painted plywood panels served as the courtyard walls, within which Armajani had begun to describe the garden elements with the kinds of simple materials children use to construct the layouts for model trains: there were balsa wood benches, artificial turf lawns, and dried weed trees rising from sand-strewn wells bordered by courses of tiny bricks. He had been shopping, Armajani told me, at a wonderful store: Debbie's Doll House. In fact, he had run up such a bill there buying materials to be incorporated into a new series of models and related wall pieces that the own-

ers had called. Was he trying to clean out their stock and go into competition with them?

In one corner of the model stood what appeared to be a group of miniature wooden barrels, their surfaces roughly painted in luminous shades of blue and green accented by daubs of white. I had never seen anything quite like them in Armajani's work before and I must have looked perplexed, because he said, "Those will be large ceramic jars. They are there because that corner needs a bright spot of color." I leaned over the model to get a closer look at the makeshift jars. It was then that I noticed a narrow band of text running atop the high-backed benches and chairs that lined the garden walls. By way of further explanation, Armajani handed me a sheet of graph paper on which he had typed:

**ANECDOTE OF THE JAR
BY WALLACE STEVENS**

**I PLACED A JAR IN TENNESSEE,
AND ROUND IT WAS, UPON A HILL.
IT MADE THE SLOVENLY WILDERNESS
SURROUND THAT HILL.**

**THE WILDERNESS ROSE UP TO IT,
AND SPRAWLED AROUND, NO LONGER WILD.
THE JAR WAS ROUND UPON THE GROUND
AND TALL AND OF A PORT IN AIR.**

**IT TOOK DOMINION EVERYWHERE.
THE JAR WAS GRAY AND BARE.
IT DID NOT GIVE OF BIRD OR BUSH,
LIKE NOTHING ELSE IN TENNESSEE.¹⁴**

¹⁴ Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p 76.



Covered Walkway
General Mills, Minneapolis

I was delighted that Armajani had selected one of the late American writer's best-known poems as the garden text, for it is an eloquent description of the transformative power of art. I hoped my colleagues would share my enthusiasm for the verse. "Don't worry," Armajani assured me. "Everyone will agree that Wallace Stevens is a poet. No one can argue about that." I laughed at the blunt simplicity—and marveled at the genius—of Armajani's logic.

In the Fall, the completed model and a set of plans were shipped to Los Angeles for review by the foundation staff and board of directors. The design was unanimously approved. Armajani's intuition had been right: Stevens' poem proved to be the perfect common ground from which a decidedly uncommon garden would grow.

• • •

Armajani and the foundation worked together to assemble the garden project team. He brought on board two groups who had assisted him in the past: Fabrication Specialties, Limited (FS Ltd), a Seattle-based company with considerable expertise in constructing public art works, was engaged to craft and install the Armajani-designed garden gate, podium and seating, and to assist with site-planning; Mary Swarhout and her partners at Continental Clay, Minneapolis, were commissioned to produce the ceramic elements. The

rest of the crew were gathered in Los Angeles by Lannan.¹⁵

According to the terms of the commission agreement, as client, Lannan Foundation was to have a say in any significant changes to the approved plan. And with Armajani's studio so far from the site, we came to be the guardians of the integrity of his vision. From time to time, we were asked by various subcontractors and consultants involved in the project for authorization to deviate from Armajani's plan in one way or another, but to these requests, the reply was always that Armajani would need to be consulted. This was, after all, not an ordinary construction project, but a work of art.

It was a fact that we were all reminded of frequently during the 16 months that *The Poetry Garden* was under construction, but perhaps no more so than one afternoon in October 1991 when I found myself along with Armajani and Robert Qualheim of FS Ltd, standing in a dusty field at the base of the foothills of San Marcos, California. We were boulder shopping.

Armajani's design for the gate to *The Poetry Garden* featured a boulder at its center, and through some research, we had learned that San Marcos was the boulder capital of Southern California. So there we were, searching for a stone the size of a Volkswagen with the help of Richard, a salesman from KRC Rock

whose T-shirt read, "Save Water, Plant a Rock." He was singularly impressed that the three of us had come from different parts of the country ". . . just to pick out a rock." I showed Richard a photo of Armajani's garden model and explained that the boulder was an important sculptural element in the artist's design. Richard nodded approvingly. "If you find one you like, and I think you will," he said, "I'm going to have to deliver it myself, because this doesn't look like an ordinary construction job." We were in good hands.



Richard assured us that as boulder fields go, KRC's lot was something of a gold mine. And indeed, within an hour or so we had tagged some promising specimens, although none was quite right. Then, as we scrambled over a pile of recently delivered stock—boulders that had rolled down the hill adjacent to the field a few weeks ago—we spied our quarry: a five-ton chunk of blue granite. "Fantastic," Armajani said in a half-whisper, "it looks just like the one in the model. Honest!"

• • •

Sitting in *The Poetry Garden* recently, I thought back to Armajani's initial reaction to the courtyard, as "a God-given space." As a resident of a city where "fabulous" and "genius" are terms used with such frequency in conversation that they have all but lost their meaning, I have become inured to hyperbole. Consequently, at the time I thought that by "God-given" Armajani simply meant that he liked the site and could imagine working in it. In retrospect, I understand that he meant precisely what he said. For stepping into the courtyard, Armajani found himself in a site with a combination of spatial and stylistic conditions so perfectly suited to his sensibility that it must have seemed, to pursue his metaphor, heaven-sent. What he saw in the courtyard was paradise, or more accurately, a modernist turn on the rudiments of a classic Islamic paradise garden.

This type of high-walled enclosure, frequently depicted in Persian miniatures of which Armajani is a connoisseur, had its origins in ancient Mesopotamia. There, in the desert territories stretching from North Africa to the valleys of the Euphrates, settled communities grew plants for crops. Surrounded by walls to give protection from marauders and desert winds, these early gardens were primarily utilitarian, although their fruit trees, herbs and medicinal plants, laid out in symmetrical rows for ease of irrigation, also possessed a decorative aspect. As garden his-

¹⁵ A complete list of individuals and companies involved in the project appears on p 31.



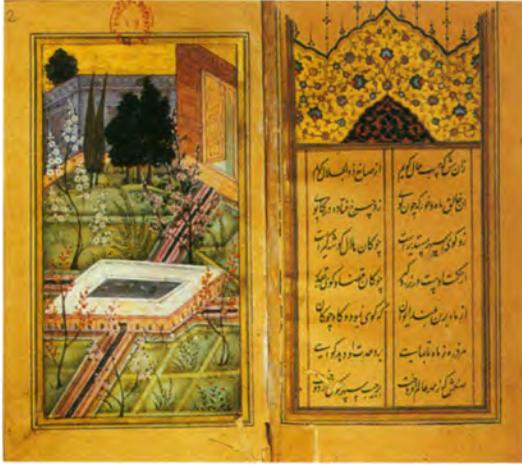


Illustration for *The Halmamah* 1603-04
Collection of the Biblioteque Nationale
Paris

torian Penelope Hobhouse notes, these gardens emphasized the contrast between two separate worlds: “. . . the outer one where nature remained awe-inspiringly in control, and an inner, artificially-created sanctuary, a refuge for man and plants from the burning desert heat, where shade trees and cool canals refreshed the body and the spirit and ensured growth.”¹⁶

It was in the lands east of Mesopotamia, where the Medes and Achaemenians established their civilizations from the ninth to the fourth centuries B.C., that walled gardens were first developed as the enclosures to which the Persians gave the name *paridaeza*, from which the English word ‘paradise’ is derived. Originally it simply meant an enclosure or park. The Persian was translated into Hebrew as *pardes* and into Greek as *paradeisos*.¹⁷

Enriched by Muslim teaching and Koranic interpretation, and backed by serious

botanic scholarship, from about the eighth century forward the Islamic garden was developed as an earthly paradise, a premonition of heaven for those who heeded the words of the Prophet. Typically, paradise gardens were divided into quarters by four irrigation channels, representing the four rivers of life, which met at a central basin. In later fourfold gardens, a stone platform (*chabutra*) was often placed above the intersection of the water channels to be used as a resting place for contemplation or conversation, for reading or for recitation of poetry.¹⁸

Over the next thousand years or so, many fourfold gardens and courtyards developed throughout Asia, Europe and Africa; they also influenced Spanish mission gardens built in the western United States.¹⁹ But it was particularly in Safavid Persia, Andalusia and Mughal India that the Islamic garden developed as a high art form in which religious teachings and poetic imagery combined with a

deep knowledge of flowers and trees to produce exquisite compositions.²⁰

In several respects, Armani’s *Poetry Garden* is heir to this ancient tradition. Just how much so can be understood by comparing its plan with that of a garden depicted in a miniature illustrating the 15th-century poem, *The Halmamah*. Painted in 1603-04 for the future Emperor Jahangir, the miniature shows a classic paradise garden, enclosed behind high walls and accessed through an imposing gateway. At its center the four rivers of life meet at a square basin surrounded by sunken flower beds and shaded by trees.

Like the courtyard depicted in the miniature, *The Poetry Garden* is a space designed for solitary contemplation, social congress and enjoyment of literature. Shielded from the outside world by walls and entered through a tall portal, the garden is planted with beautiful flowers and trees, including a majestic, 35-foot California live oak



(*quercus agrifolia*) and a 25-foot sweet shade (*hymenoporum flavum*) whose summer blossoms emit a subtle, apricot fragrance.

The Poetry Garden plan is quadripartite: four polygonal plots of grass shaded by four dwarf maples—two *acer palmatum*, one *acer sangukaken* and a stunning *acer bloodgood* whose delicate limbs are aflame with brilliant, crimson color—are set within an acid-washed aggregate plaza stippled with black, white and rose agate chips. The shimmering bits of colored stone give the plaza floor the look of a pebble-strewn riverbed and lend the entire space a decorative inflection that echoes the intricate surface patterning of the painted miniature.

No water flows in Armani’s eco-conscious California garden, although its presence is evoked in the

16 Penelope Hobhouse, *Gardening Through the Ages* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p 11.

17 *Ibid.*, p 18.

18 *Ibid.*, p 44.

19 In this article, I have used the words ‘garden’ and ‘courtyard’ interchangeably. Strictly speaking, however, the Islamic garden and courtyard are two related, but different forms. A garden is typically composed of a large green area surrounding a centrally located palace or pavilion. This is in contrast to a courtyard which is normally a smaller, more densely developed space located within a dwelling, palace, fort or mosque and bounded by an arcade. There are trees, flowers and sometimes grass in a garden; the surface of a courtyard is predominantly hard—marble, mosaic or stone—although grass and trees are not excluded. Gardens are outer directed; that is, the main directional view designed to be taken by the occupant of a garden is from the central edifice outward. Courtyards, by contrast, are inner-directed spaces in which focus is invariably from the peripheral arcade to the centrally located pool or fountain. A courtyard is appreciated from its surrounding arcade, whereas people sit within a garden itself, or in the central pavilion, in order to enjoy it. For an exhaustive discussion of the subject, see Jonas Lehrman, *Earthy Paradise: Garden and Courtyard in Islam*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

20 Hobhouse, p 44.



15 pairs of cerulean blue, emerald green and white ceramic urns, stacked lip-to-lip in one corner of the garden. Their silhouette was inspired in part, Armajani says, by his memories of the huge, unglazed pottery urns that his mother used to store dried beans and rice, and by the elegantly shaped water jugs that lined the arcade walls of his childhood home. In place of the customary paradise garden canals and basin, we find four narrow pathways that lead to a rectangular flower bed densely planted with silver bush, sea pink, blue fescue, lavender, iris and hibiscus. Enclosed by a low fence surmounted by four lecterns in the shape of open books from which readings can be given, this perfumed garden within a garden is the heart of the space. It is the center of focus for visitors who may take a seat on one of the many high-backed armchairs and benches that line the courtyard walls.

The Poetry Garden is much more than a contemporary gloss on a paradise garden, however. As the critic Christopher Knight has

observed: "Walking into *The Poetry Garden* is like walking into an orderly public park in a small Midwestern city. And, into a dynamic Russian Constructivist stage set. And, into the sequestered space of a Persian miniature. And, into the hand-hewn enclosure of a California Mission courtyard. And finally, into assorted other spaces whose vaguely familiar identities are not immediately apparent, but which will likely reveal themselves over time. The garden's layered references peel back slowly, shifting subtle viewpoints like a Cubist collage. . . . Identifiable sources in disparate cultures remain distinct and identifiable; yet all have been woven into a seamless whole that creates its own particular blend of pungent flavors. . . . It's not difficult to recognize the aspiration for [this] lovely garden. It's a living metaphor for the complex proposition of American democracy."²¹

Armajani has long championed the notion that public art should reflect American ideals, and indeed, in design and conception, *The Poetry Garden* embodies the lauded virtues of the common man, Yankee ingenuity, small-scale industry and old-fashioned neighborliness. Stepping into the courtyard, one thinks of such archetypal American gathering places as the village common, the town hall and the little red schoolhouse. These readings are underscored by

a myriad of details drawn from vernacular architecture sources—from the park-bench-green hue of the fence that encloses the central garden, to the standing-sawtooth, red-brick borders that surround the tree wells, to the seating whose horizontal slats of Alaskan cedar transform the garden's stucco walls into vast expanses of clapboard.

Thoroughly American, too, is Wallace Stevens' poem, *The Anecdote of the Jar*. Its three stanzas are presented in a single line of ceramic tile set into a metal channel mounted atop the high-backed seating, and its imagery is pushed into three dimensions in the tall, ceramic jars that stand in the southeast corner of the garden. The text is lit from above by standard outdoor fixtures that emit a yellow, candlelight glow during evening readings.



Armajani says that he likes the poem because it ". . . speaks to the dichotomy that exists between an object of art and its environment. Our job is to reconcile these two polarities."²² His appreciation of Stevens transcends his fondness for this single



verse, however. The artist clearly feels a kinship with the poet himself, and relishes the fact that Stevens was ". . . a 'regular Joe' who made a living selling insurance." He admires Stevens' wonderfully flat-footed American diction which, he says, provides "ordinary folks" entrée to the unfamiliar world of poetry. "Poetry has not been allowed to play its social function in America," Armajani observed in conversation recently. "For many years, it has been thought of as something alien and intellectual, something that belongs to 'ivory towers.' But poetry is being re-evaluated; now we are going back to it."

Armajani says that the simplicity of Shaker design and the fellowship of Quaker meeting houses with seats facing the room's

21 Christopher Knight, "A Metaphor Grows in 'The Poetry Garden,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1992, Section F, pp 1,7.

22 Ann Jarmusch, "Artist's environmental work aims to reunite people, art," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 12 April 1992, p E9.





Gustav Klucis
Design for Screen 1922
 watercolor and ink on paper
 Collection of George Costakis
 Athens

center, inspired his decision to ring the garden with benches and arm-chairs.²³ Yet, other influences are evident, particularly in the construction of the seating. Fabricated of three-inch-thick slats of clear Alaskan cedar set within angular, white steel frames, the capacious chairs and benches suggest an idiosyncratic mix of 20th-century art and design styles from Russian Constructivism and Dutch De Stijl to American Mission. A similar amalgam of stylistic sources characterizes the 16-foot-high painted-steel gates that lead from the street into the garden. What Armajani describes as the “self-evident, honest construction” of the doors evokes such quintessentially American idioms as the picket fence and the trussed railway bridge, while the chevron patterning of the lintel is infused with a dynamism that recalls the revolutionary spirit of the Russian Constructivists. One thinks especially of Aleksandr Rodchenko’s vigorous graphic designs for book jackets and posters, and the intricate geometries of Gustav Klucis’ propaganda kiosks and Lyubov’ Popova’s stage sets.

As for the granite boulder that rises at the center of the garden gate When asked if it might be interpreted as a solemn tribute

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The artist, quoted in Nancy Princenthal, “The Odyssey of Home: Siah Armajani’s *Elements*,” *Siah Armajani/Elements* (New York: Max Protetch Inc., 1991), unpaginated.

to his late friend and collaborator Scott Burton who used granite as his primary medium, Armajani demurs. Nonetheless, the massive stone brings to mind Burton’s hulking, but remarkably elegant, rock chairs of the early 1980s. At the same time, it suggests the prosaic historical markers in municipal parks and at “scenic vistas” along America’s highways. Perhaps the rock is intended as a witty visual pun on the word “foundation”? Armajani laughs and admits that he did have that in mind. And what of the rock’s position? It straddles the gate, standing half inside, and half outside the garden. “The rock is an invitation to those outside the gates to enter the garden,” Armajani says. “The rock belongs to the neighborhood.” In fact, the rock has become an important landmark in the community. First-time visitors are typically instructed to “turn right on McConnell Avenue, then make a left at the boulder on Coral Tree Place.”

There are other elements in the garden that an analysis of the space could cover. Everywhere you look there is evidence of Armajani’s extraordinary attention to detail and of his highly developed understanding of how people use public spaces. The design of the seating, for example, acknowledges that the garden is a place for both solitary and group activities, for rumination and for conversation, for friends and for strangers. There

are single chairs for individuals, “love seats” that a couple might occupy, larger “sofas” for three or four acquaintances, and long benches for groups. Looking at the seating, one recalls that Armajani has described with sympathy a predicament that faced Henry David Thoreau when he furnished his shed: “On the one hand, he wanted to be neighborly. On the other, he wanted to be alone. So he decided on three chairs. One for solitude, two for companionship and three for society.”²⁴

Asked where he prefers to sit in the garden, Armajani points to the secluded alleyway that runs along the building. There, isolated from the main space, stands a solitary chair, flanked by the garden’s only open-mouthed jar. The vaguely anthropomorphic pair (the artist and his muse, perhaps?) face a large window that provides a view of the book-lined walls of the foundation’s literary library.