

A photograph of a multi-tiered waterfall in a park-like setting. The waterfall flows over several stone tiers, creating a misty spray. The surrounding landscape is lush with green pine trees and vibrant yellow autumn leaves. In the foreground, there are stone steps and a path covered in fallen yellow leaves. The overall scene is serene and picturesque, capturing the beauty of a Pacific Northwest landscape in autumn.

Michael Leccese

# American Eden

Landscape Architecture  
of the Pacific West



# INTRODUCTION

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## **KENKAY ASSOCIATES**

A forest of bamboo at  
Bank of America Plaza  
buffers harsh winds  
while adding greenery,  
sound and movement  
to the plaza.

In June of 1998, I called Isabelle Greene to tell her I was writing a book on the landscape architecture of the West Coast of the United States. Greene, the Santa Barbara designer who invented a new style of garden for Southern California, said: "Good. This is where landscape architecture is happening." Many would agree. After World War II, America became obsessed with California culture and its mild climate. California had four million residents in 1930. Today the state is home to 37 million Americans out of a total population of 250 million. Once considered drizzly backwaters, the Northwestern states Oregon and Washington have been "discovered" as well, and they have begun setting the pace for cultural advances as quickly as California. For example, in the 1970s, both Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, helped create a national penchant for public art by inaugurating programs that dedicated a percent of public works budgets for that purpose.

It is difficult to generalize about such a large area—321,000 square miles, or about 50 percent larger than all of France—that contains flat deserts, moss-draped rainforests, vast grasslands, 14,000-foot peaks, active volcanos, lush agricultural valleys, and rugged coastline. Then there are the giant sequoia: redwood forests with the world's oldest and tallest trees. Yet it is no oversimplification to say that most areas of the West Coast share an excellent environment for growing plants—native and horticultural—as well as some of the most dramatic indigenous species of trees, shrubs and flowers. This aspect combines with the spectacular geology expressed in gorges, coastal mountain ranges, and, of course, the San Andreas Fault connecting the three states like the lifeline on a palm.

This book mainly addresses the coastal areas of these states, where mountain ranges combine with the moderating force of the Pacific to create a Mediterranean-like climate. The result is an American Eden, a place where landscape architecture has met one of its highest expressions. Yet this Eden is no wilderness. California is the most industrial state in the United States. Washington hosts such corporations as Boeing and Microsoft. Oregon has Nike as well as burgeoning high-tech industries. All three states have been shaped by public-works projects of Biblical proportions. Los Angeles imports its water from a valley some 200 miles distant. Over the course of 50 years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completely altered the Columbia River—which carries twice as much water as the Nile—with dams and reservoirs for electric power and irrigation. "[The Corps] did so with some trepidation," wrote Timothy Egan in *The Good Rain*. "Man as a geological force—this was a line that had never been crossed before."

This book deals with the designers who are fortunate to have these natural elements, as well as modern engineering and materials, at their disposal. Most originate from other places: Lawrence Halprin from New York City; Richard Haag from Kentucky; Angela Danadjieva from Bulgaria. (Isabelle Greene, from an almost royal family of designers, is a notable exception as a California native.) Many are environmental crusaders, iconoclasts and, social experimenters. For example, Lawrence Halprin applied the principles of the "happenings" and "be-ins" of the 1960s to public design sessions. He has held design charettes that involved building models from driftwood found on the beach. Topher Delaney integrates folk art into sophisticated environments she builds with her own hands. Richard Haag appropriates "guerilla" tactics to influence public officials, and has design solutions which come to him in dreams. Ken Kay seeks to rescue spaces for pedestrians from the onslaught of California car culture.

In the 18th century, English landscape designers fashioned real places based upon the idealized classical landscapes painted by Claude Lorrain. The idealized pastoral landscape became the basis for most large-scale landscape design—until Peter Walker created a new prototype that translates Modern minimalist art into severely abstract landscape compositions. "If there isn't a history, we will create one," says Topher Delaney. "That's the beauty of California."

Some designers profiled in this book served as mentors for others. Thomas Dolliver Church is the group's patriarch. Church originated a new type of California residential landscape in the 1940s. During this period, he employed Halprin, who helped design and build some of Church's most famous gardens. Halprin later hired Danadjieva, Haag and Robert Murase. Walker's former firm

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Sasaki, Walker and Associates gave rise to the career of George Hargreaves. For a decade, Ken Kay collaborated with another California Modernist, Garrett Eckbo. Numerous innovations can be traced to this group. They are worth listing.

• The creation of the "indoor-outdoor" house. The Modernist ideal for a residence broke down walls between the interior and exterior, bringing the outdoors inside with large windows, and extending the interior through patios and shaded overhangs. The frost-free coastal climate makes this ideal possible and desirable.

• The reclamation of industrial or severely polluted land for gardens and other public uses. Seattle's Freeway Park and Pigott Memorial Corridor, by Halprin and Danadjieva, places 20 acres of forest, gardens, pathways, and waterfalls on a fortified lid built over an Interstate highway. Across town, Haag's Gas Works Park represents a daring combination of earthworks sculpture, public park and an attempt to cleanse polluted soil by composting in situ. George Hargreaves' Byxbee Park in Palo Alto, California, sculpts a mound of garbage into an aerie overlooking a bird refuge. In Alameda, California, Ken Kay's Marina Village rescues a polluted shipyard as a vast mixed-use community. All of these ventures involved such controversial measures that they have been admired but not widely repeated. Years after their completion, they remain years ahead of their time.

• The adaptation of native plants for gardens and other designed landscapes. Less than a generation ago, the plants indigenous to the Pacific West were regarded as weeds. These were to be discarded as the first step in creating a designed landscape featuring thirsty tropical and semi-tropical plants. Landscape architects such as Isabelle Greene demonstrated how to adapt natives for gardens that were more colorful, but also more tolerant of drought than their ornamental and horticultural cousins.

• The "Modernist" application of new forms and materials. "Nothing," wrote Diane Kostial McGuire in *Gardens of America: Three Centuries of Design*, "more clearly distinguished the California garden than its imaginative use of concrete." Church and Eckbo showed how beautiful gardens could be synthetically molded. Projects such as Halprin's water plazas and Walker's Library Walk in La Jolla, California, continue to demonstrate how industrial and prefabricated materials can match the region's climate and vegetation.

• The re-invention and reclamation of the American plaza. It is said that American cities lack social spaces. Indeed, after promising starts with city plans in Philadelphia and Savannah, most American cities were built on a simple grid expanding out into wilderness and prairie with no pause for park or plaza. In the 1960s and 70s, Halprin and Danadjieva invented a new type of plaza based upon natural features and specifically designed to counter the ill-effects of the automobile. With the assistance of his wife, a noted dancer, Halprin actually "choreographed" these spaces with areas that people would naturally gravitate towards to perform, observe or seek respite.

At the same time, many more purposeless American plazas were built as little more than doilies for high-rise office buildings to perch upon. "The local spirits were chased away," wrote Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe of generic Modernist landscape design. These bleak plazas, often sunken or raised beyond public view, remained deservedly empty and unloved for a generation. In the middle 1990s, Kay began to invent means to infiltrate new life and greenery into corporate plazas on San Francisco's California Street. Many of these innovations now matriculate to the East Coast. Boston, for example, is "lidding over" the Central Artery Expressway to create 27 acres of parks and gardens. In 1997, Halprin's Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial opened in Washington, D.C., exposing many Easterners to his interactive water-plazas for the first time. The project was an instant sensation.

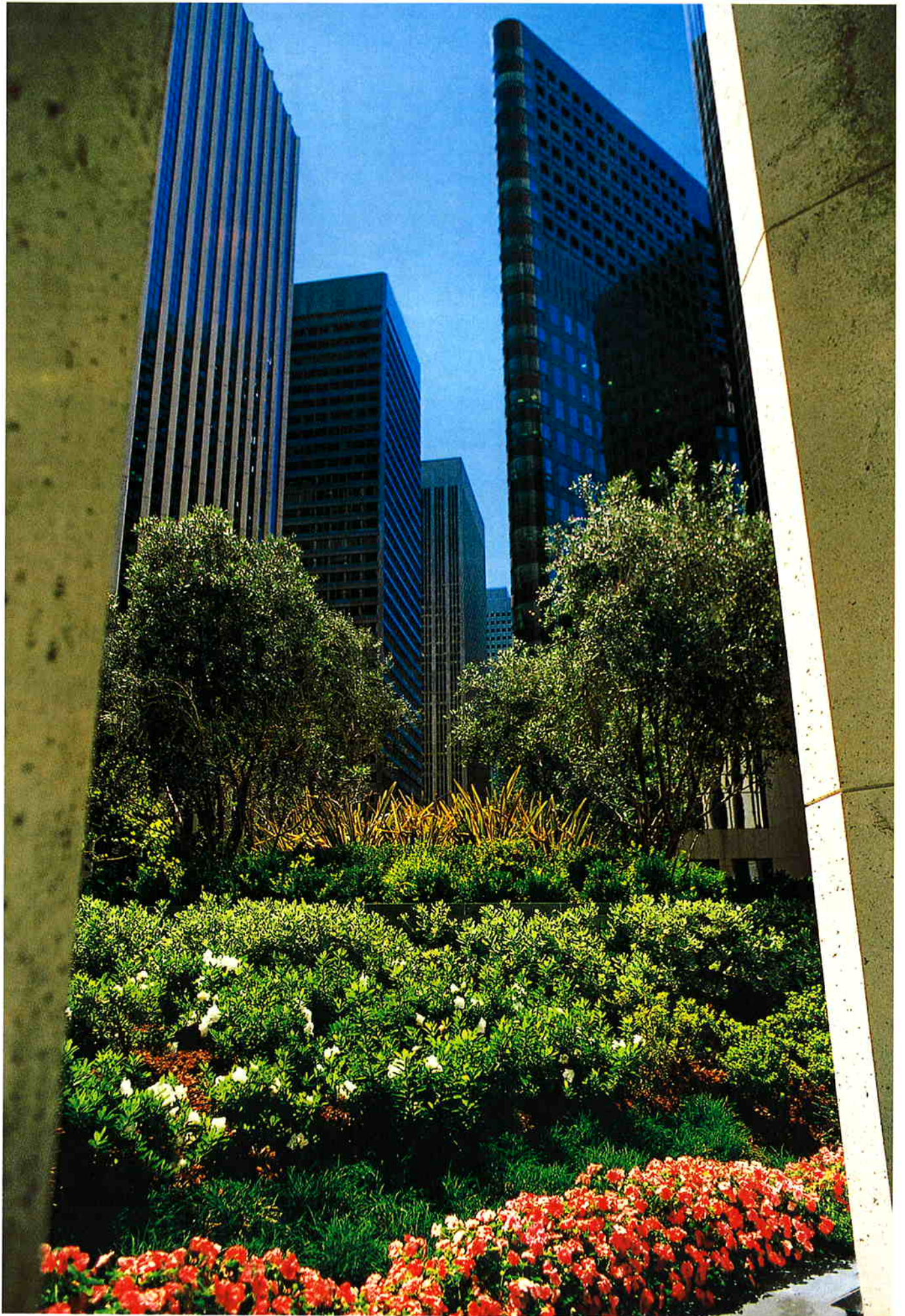
Saul Bellow once said that America had tilted, and the dirt landed in California. Now California and the Pacific West have tilted back in the other direction, sending a rich loam of ideas across the nation.

**Michael Leccese**  
**Boulder, Colorado**

**LORNA JORDAN**

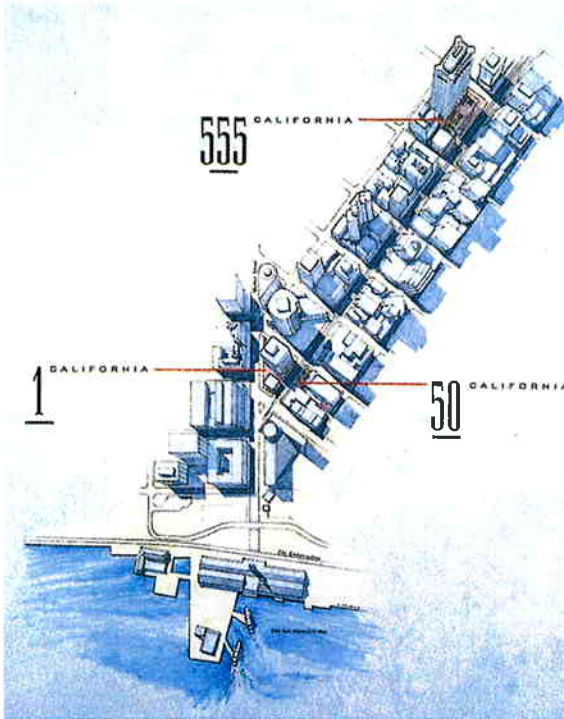
*Justice Garden Path,*

*Kent, Washington.*



# California Street Plazas

San Francisco  
California



## TOP AND ABOVE

Overview of California Street shows proximity of three plazas in San Francisco's financial district. All three were a catalogue of design mistakes of the 1970s.

## OPPOSITE PAGE

New garden at One California Street masks entrance to an underground parking garage. The old plaza featured an acre of slippery tile, cold concrete steps and physically deteriorating pavings and plantings.

A longtime collaborator with the pioneering Modernist Garrett Eckbo, Ken Kay is a self-taught landscape architect who has made a measurable impact on San Francisco's Bay Area since moving to California in 1975. His work brings gardens into harsh urban spaces while reclaiming them from autos for pedestrians.

In the mid-1990s, Kay was hired by the Shorenstein Company, a large Bay Area real-estate company, to redesign three urban plazas dating from the early 1970s. All three are located within a short trolley ride of each other on San Francisco's California Street, the city's main banking and financial district. All three were a catalogue of design mistakes common to offices plazas constructed on the model of Mies Van der Rohe's 1959 Seagram Building in New York City.

To allow more light onto the street, and to create a social setting, Mies set his sleek tower back behind a large plaza. The idea proved so popular that many cities began to provide incentives for such configurations in their zoning for high-rise office districts. While the Seagram Plaza was successful, too many of the plazas it inspired were poorly designed and lacking in purpose. They frequently became unpleasant environments, subject to harsh winds, with no shade in the hot sections and no sun in the cool areas. Without greenery, programmed activities or places to sit, they were empty all the time even though thousands of people might work within an elevator ride. Most people actually bypassed the plazas on elevators connecting directly to underground parking.

These weaknesses were exposed by researcher and writer William H. Whyte, who in the 1970s studied Seagram Plaza and other public spaces using time-lapse photography. In the middle of New York City, under ideal weather conditions at lunchtime, Whyte discovered an average of only four people per 1,000 square feet using office plazas. Despite Whyte's landmark studies, the barren plazas proliferated through the 1980s, significantly contributing to the decline in the vitality of

American streetlife. Europe, with such areas as La Défense in Paris, has also become acquainted with this stark form of public space.

Now designers like Kay are rescuing these urban wastelands. At the Bank of America Plaza, Kay had interesting raw material. The original design was produced by a venerable team: architects Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons, with Pietro Belluschi and Lawrence Halprin as design consultants. It was completed with alterations by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. After a trip to Devils Postpile in the eastern Sierras, Halprin suggested the triangular configuration of plaza steps, which make sculpture out of the major grade change on California Street. He also suggested the creased facade of the 55-story building to create numerous bay windows. Both the plaza and the building were constructed from dark granite.

The result was elegant, but it didn't work. Named after the Bank of America's founder, the one-acre Giannini Plaza became one of the city's most hostile urban spaces. The plaza was cold, dark and windswept. An original fountain was converted to a planter because so much wind-blown water doused pedestrians. Gusts could even snap mature trees and send them cartwheeling down California Street. "On all but the balmiest days," wrote Gerald D. Adams in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "people scurry through without a pause." The dark granite of the building facade made the space seem even more gloomy. The building's identical bays created their own problems. Visitors had trouble finding the front door.

Kay's task was to carefully add gardens and other elements to increase the space's warmth and function. At the plaza's east end, he placed a new grove of Japanese oaks and shore pines to buffer winds. Next to the trees, which are set into square planter boxes with built-in benches, Kay resurrected the fountain with a new design. Instead of shooting into the air, water pools in a central pond flanked by four shallow ponds enveloped in crenellated stone. Then it falls in calm sheets over bronze weirs. Viewed from a distance, a forest of 30-foot-tall bamboo seems to grow directly out of these pools. Rustling delicately in the wind, the bamboo adds a dynamic element to the plaza by providing shade, sound and movement. Bronze bamboo sculpture created by metal designer Michael Bondi prevents the real bamboo from flopping over onto the seating. The entire composition is framed, but not dwarfed, by the brutalistic one-story bank that holds the plaza's east end.

Farther west along the plaza, Masayuki Nagare's sculpture *Transcendence*, a boulder-shaped, polished granite protrusion that San Francisco columnist Herb Caen dubbed "the banker's heart," once sat blankly on the plaza. It has been set into a new bed of Mondo grass, a soft groundcover with lavender flowers. A boxwood parterre, resembling an exploded square, flanks the sculpture and frames the main building entrance.

These additions are environmentally favorable as well. Honey-colored benches and planters were fabricated from mahogany from Mexican forests certified as "well managed" by the SmartWood program of the Rainforest Alliance. Berkeley's EcoTimber International, a leading distributor of ecological forest products, supplied the mahogany.

On an unusually sunny spring day in San Francisco, Kay looked onto this newly humanized plaza with satisfaction. Office workers draped themselves over the benches. A hummingbird flitted through the bamboo and a robin sipped water from the fountain. "You never used to see birds or people here," he says.

Down the block, Kay also orchestrated plaza renovations at One California Street (the Mutual Benefit Life Building of 1970, by Welton Becket & Associates), and 50 California Street (the Union Bank Building of 1972, also by Welton Becket). The makeover of One California and its lobby was completed in 1995. The old plaza embraced an acre of slippery tile, cold concrete steps and other physically deteriorating paving and plantings. Circulation was so confusing that pedestrians couldn't find the front door.



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*By reclaiming these empty plazas for people, the Ken Kay projects are enhancing the economic life of California Street as well. "We forgot that lesson for a long time," says Kay, "which is how we inherited lifeless plazas in the first place."*

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*Coffee shop designed to resemble a vernacular metal building enlivens plaza at 50 California.*



As part of a \$3 million renovation, Kay brought in warmer new materials, including Texas red granite and green limestone pavers from Germany. The red granite offers a delicate sandstone hue, richly veined with grey streaks.

The foot of Market Street, which meets California Street on a diagonal, now features a fragrant raised garden with flax and lavender planted within a circle of olive trees. This round garden, with seating built into its retaining walls, places the plantings at eye level while masking the entry to a parking garage beneath the plaza. It also provides a center for the triangular space. Brazilian pepper trees now frame the front door. The redesigned lobby features curving bands of green limestone set into quartzite pavers. This leads to the lobby: an indoor forest of tall bamboo. The plaza and lobby are now unified into an indoor-outdoor design, which also makes it easier for people to find their way.

Across the street, Kay's \$3 million renovation of the plaza at 50 California employs the same materials and

**FAR LEFT AND ABOVE**

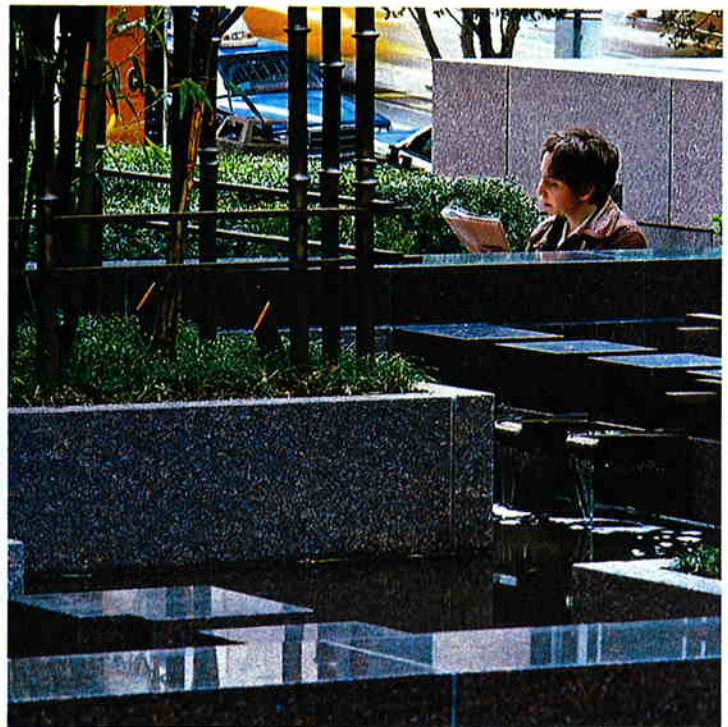
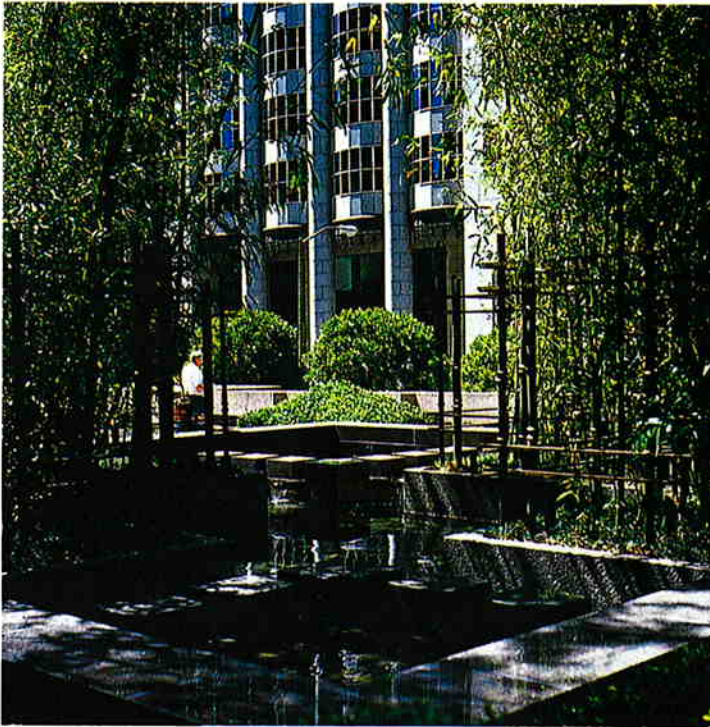
*View of fountain and parterre beds at Bank of America Plaza (555 California).*

**OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT**

*Tall bamboo appears to be growing from fountain at Bank of America Plaza. A bronze fence molded to resemble bamboo keeps the tall grasses from flopping over onto people who come to enjoy the plaza.*

**OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT**

*New fountain at Bank of America Plaza—one of three revitalized by KenKay Associates—replaces one that used to spray water on passing pedestrians.*



paving forms as One California. To attract people to linger, the new plaza includes a coffee kiosk recalling a vernacular metal building. By reclaiming these places for people, the plazas also enhance the street's economic vitality. "We forgot that lesson for a time," says Kay, "which is how we inherited lifeless plazas in the first place."

As with Eckbo, Kay's design aesthetic is not flashy or identifiable from a glance. "We don't do bumps and stripes or any other pattern overlaid on the land," he says. Instead, his projects are connected by this thread: they seek empathy with their place and with the people who inhabit them. Kay was for a time co-chair of the environmental committee of the Congress for the New Urbanism, the national organization founded in 1993 to revive principals of traditional town and city planning. He pays careful attention to such issues as accommodating the pedestrian, making connections to transit and creating compact configurations for development. "As landscape architects," he says, "this is the old urbanism for us."