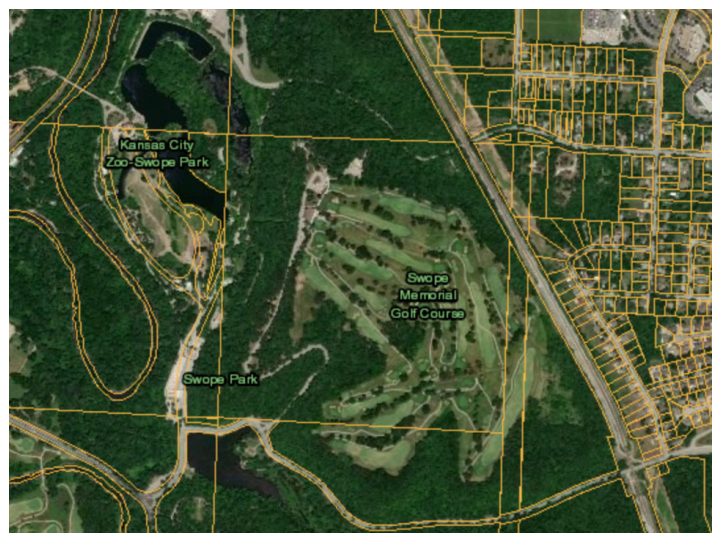
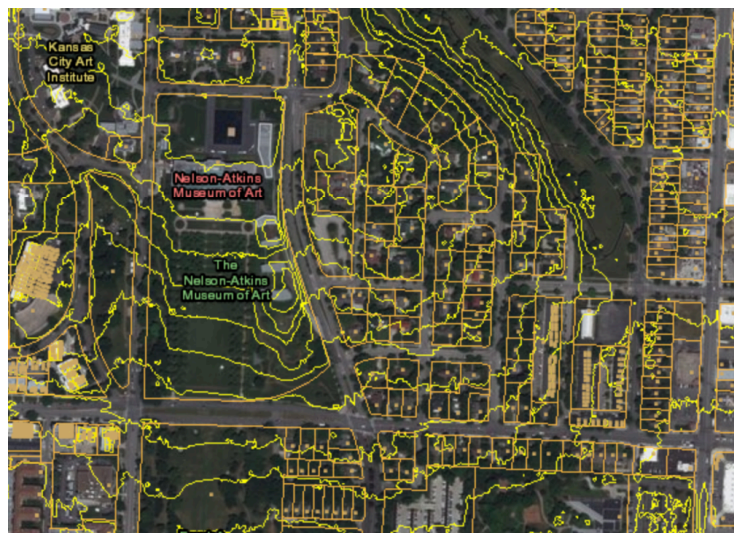


Downen and Goldsworthy Walls in Kansas City, 2019

by Anne Gatschet



GIS map views. Left: The Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO. Right: Memorial Drive in Swope Park, Kansas City

In the past year, two new Kansas City walls have joined the fellowship of our public artworks. Over this set of seasons, Jill Downen's and Andy Goldsworthy's very distinct walls have taken up residence in green spaces near public roads, where each invites us to join it in putting an ear to the ground.

These walls are poetic personae, listening to and quietly translating urban context. They act with such humility in and on Kansas City that their artistic statements might be described as whispers. Each formally admits its own fragmentary, temporal nature, showing in its tone and attitude that it accepts or welcomes interruption. They exhibit humility, but not reluctance. Whispers, while they are quiet and intentionally unfinished, also have a certain focus and intensity; and so it is with these walls. Although the two are strangers to each other on our streets, their distinct voices coincide in a remarkable appeal.

Kansas City artist Jill Downen installed *Architectural Folly from a Future Place* in August of 2018, just uphill from the Swope Memorial, at the far end of Memorial Drive in Swope Park. She could

hardly have found a less showy site, or a more perfect one. Her work is a low, white concrete wall, angled at one end, a wide fissure dividing it in the middle. A folly is considered something that removes function from form: it is thought of as a useless adornment. And, in fact, Downen's folly scrupulously refers to its own measure and style and is undoubtedly an architectural fragment. At the same time, though, this formal gem is a functional offering. Its 14 tons and 30-foot length serve perfectly as a bench. If you rest there and take in the wall's relationship to the surroundings, it relates your form to the place around you. The form of the wall attends to that of the human, and as it invites you, it speaks to your sense of visual, physical and emotional measure. Its clean, graceful lines welcome the movement of thoughts across the surrounding land and cityscape. This is a smart wall.



Whether you take a seat upon *Architectural Folly from a Future Place* or walk around it, you find that its contours draw your vision into movement, as if

Architectural Folly from a Future Place [Photo by EG Schempf]

you had entered the shadings of a geometric painting or an architectural blueprint. Shining white, it suggests its measure beyond itself and unfolds its neat horizon onto the neighboring limestone walls, the cul de sac of Memorial Drive, golfers at the clubhouse in the distance, or the edges of the park's great woods; and in this formal opening and resting place, you can relax at the edges of civic intention. You are not on the road, at the memorial, in the woods, nor visiting the clubhouse, and you are beyond traffic, in a margin where you consider what the spaces around you might be or become. This wall, with a restrained elegance of contour, guides sight and opens itself as a center of rest and contemplation.

Last May, I sat with Jill Downen in Atkins Auditorium. We listened to artist Andy Goldsworthy speak about *Walking Wall*, his current and ongoing installation made of quarried, Kansas limestone. *Walking Wall* installs a wandering, drystone barrier in five, successive stages around the Nelson-Atkins museum campus. In each stage, Goldsworthy directs its placement and height while masons lay it. It remains for some weeks, and then is disassembled and its next stage begun. In the fall of 2019, with its fifth stage, it will come to rest, partly inside the walls of the museum and partly outdoors. Goldsworthy has not planned its exact path ahead of time, but follows the dictates of time and space as he and the wall encounter them.

In his talk, Goldsworthy described how he “draws a landscape” with his 100 tons of stone, reflecting in it the requirements of time, such as the five, scheduled stages of the wall’s journey. He translates the seasons, such as the way the colors of the Nelson’s winter lawn indicate the nearness of bedrock beneath them. He and the wall also reflect spatial constraints, such as areas around artworks in the Donald J Hall Sculpture Garden, spaces whose meaning he mustn’t disrupt.

Among the many environmentally responsive walls and other stone works Goldsworthy has built throughout his long, worldwide career, the Kansas City installation is unique. After days of labor, when all the stones are placed, the work pauses as if “completed” and then with another terrific effort of hands and bodies, it literally moves again, advancing across the ground. As its title suggests, the wall’s animation increases our sense of its subjectivity. We move into a relation with this *Walking Wall*, meeting it as an honored storyteller and noticing, as Goldsworthy put it in his talk, how, undoing and redoing itself, “it takes from its past and gives itself to the future.”

One of the effects of the work is that it makes us aware of Kansas City's many other limestone walls, of the hands that built them and time's effect on them. In this and many awakenings, *Walking Wall* gives broader sense to the boundaries around us. It increases our sensation of built boundaries, making it clear that as civic and architectural beings, we answer not only to social forces, but also to natural forces and to experiences that we share poetically.



A visitor at Andy Goldsworthy's Walking Wall (first stage) [4.19 Photo: AG]

Unlike *Architectural Folly from a Future Place*, *Walking Wall* is not a thing on which to sit, or even a thing to touch. We respect and regard it as we might a giant animal ambling over our ground. But similar to Downen's wall, Goldsworthy's invites us to experience a built boundary unmoored from social meanings.

Where Downen's wall directs us to consider our own formal experience at the contours of road, wood and building, Goldsworthy's delves into the slow churn of time expressed by bedrock, rain and the materials of the built space. Both walls are openings whose vantages let us feel our individual bodies measured by broader temporalities like weather, geography, physics, and the nature of our species. Our species is social and sometimes civic, but these walls bring social forces to the level of natural elements and poetic, human sense. The spectacles of social power that walls often loudly convey are muted when we sit with or walk with these more quiet walls.



Goldsworthy's Walking Wall (first stage) and the Nelson Atkin's Bloch Building [4.19 Photo: AG]

Both Downen and Goldsworthy recognize that walls are openings. Outside social statements of property and division, and beyond functions of keeping and retaining, walls invite us.

Goldsworthy's wall opens as it moves and as we move around it. Its form describes an undulant line that draws us back and forth across the city's terrain like the brush of a landscape painter.

The fissure in Downen's wall welcomes our step to pass through it, and the surface invites the hand to trace a fine, horizontal rule of polished lapis as we walk alongside it. When we touch this blue horizon, the wall opens itself to our vertical orientation as humans. We feel through its vivid measure that we are the plumb line in our city's scape.

Accepting the invitations offered by *Architectural Folly from a Future Place* and *Walking Wall*, we discover that walls hold human nature as reliably as they hold social meaning. The distinction between those categories becomes significant. From the elemental vantage these walls afford us, in their frank and modest positions in time and space, we might see ourselves more clearly in our social configurations. Most walls that define our urban spaces seem to divide and define us. But those forces and images of social division are only one quality of being walls, as stratification

and crystallization are qualities of being stone, but not all of stone itself. Both of these walls seem quietly to insist that the way a thing is distributed is not the thing itself.

The encounter with seasons, the measure of human-made spaces, the obeisance to gravity, the world's punishing encouragement of the body — we share these facts with walls. Whispering about such inevitabilities, two walls at once stand in Kansas City, strangers to each other, but each for its part determined to open our ways.



Architectural Folly from a Future Place, by Jill Downen [Photo by Charles Schwall]