What does it mean for an artist to work in the domain of design, planning, and policy? What does an artist bring to those tasks that differ from the perspective and methods of the landscape architect? The works of the artists Helen and Newton Harrison offer a host of answers and models from which landscape architects have much to learn. Their new book, The Time of the Force Majeure (Prentel, 2016), reflects on their life’s work and is a source of inspiration. In brilliant projects spanning five decades, the Harrisons have made proposals for gardens, neighborhoods, watersheds, large regions, and entire continents. From the very beginning, they have been inspired by the ecological imperative.

The work is breathtaking. To follow the Harrisons’ story from Making Earth (1970) to Say when: A Proving Ground (2011) is to embark on an adventure in which a consistent mission and approach, diverse places
and people, and serendipitous events combine in a thrilling and satisfying whole. One work informs the next in progression. At this time, the narrative of a particular story is abruptly broken by circumstance, but then it is taken up again years later.

I recognize in the Harrisons' approach and methods many similarities with the best works of landscape architecture, but the distinctive aspects of their work are telling. Landscape architects can learn much from this project's brilliant use of "guiding metaphor," for example, not only to advance their own thinking but also as a way to transform the perceptions of others. If designers use metaphor, they often do so in a shallow manner—using the form of a leaf or tree as the basis for the layout of a park, for example. Similarly, Harrisons' use metaphorically routines to figure-ground diagrams—white buildings are shown in black figures—and the spaces between them in white (ground)—in order to study urban form. The Harrisons' use of figure-ground perception as a method for discovering the invisible is more complex and compelling. For designers and planners who want to think about how practice can be a form of research, The Time of the Force Majeure is a textbook; the research questions alone are thought provoking.

What strikes me most deeply, however, are the ways the Harrisons designed almost every aspect of every project to "bring forth a new state of mind" in themselves and their audience, and the reflective strategies by which they accomplish this transformation. This is an essential missing step in most landscape architecture practice, and it is in this area that we have most to learn from the Harrisons, not only in everyday projects, but in the major challenges facing humankind. Human societies cannot successfully mitigate and adapt to the stresses of climate change without a new state of mind, and landscape architects have an essential role to play. The Harrisons have been demonstrating this fact for more than 40 years. It is time to join them.

The Harrisons came to ecological design and planning as the extension of their evolving work as pioneers of the eco-art movement. After Earth Day in 1970, Newton Harrison decided to focus on work that "benefited the ecosystem." In the 1970s, Helen Harrison would go to the library and scan the shelves for books that might inspire a project. That was how she discovered the greenhouse effect and the predictors of climate change that would become a focus for the rest of their careers. In 1974, they created their first project on climate change and the need for action. From then on, the two worked as partners with a shared mission. By 1976, the Harrisons had "invented" their "fundamental contract":

We would go to a place only by invitation; we would accept an invitation only if it included some means for networking into a larger community; we would agree only to go for a week or two at first, to think and research. To earn our way we would sing for our supper... by speaking or performing.

If an idea emerges, and patrons or sponsors agree to support the work, the Harrisons may agree to remain and develop that idea. But they assert their freedom to define the problem and determine the product.

The problem, the "field of play," and the product emerge from the work itself. All three, as defined by the Harrisons, are usually quite different from their sponsors' preconceptions. In 1969, they were asked to help with a nature reserve along the Sava River near Zagreb, Croatia. The Harrisons found that plans for the reserve itself were developing nicely, but discovered that its health was threatened by pollution from factories and agriculture upstream. The problem was to make the water clean, the field of play, to become the entire watershed, and the product, A Breathing Space for the Sava River (1989-2000), was a plan to control pollution.

"Almost all our work begins with a question," Newton told me. "What's good here, what's bad, what's horrible?" "How big is here?" Given the nature of the Harrisons' work, these questions are inevitably ecological. What ecosystems are present, what is their state of health, and how are they entangled with human activities? What is the territory or field of play required to understand a problem and address its solution? What are the relevant ecosystems and political and social systems? What processes sustain these systems and what territories (fields) and boundaries (frames) do those processes create?

The Harrisons formulate questions to frame their research. "What would Bein look like if the temperature rose three degrees Celsius?" (The Garden of Hot Winds and Warm Rain, 1996). "If there were enough biodiversity in the species existing in Zagreb to survive and possibly thrive when the High Grounds of the Sierra experience the full impact of global warming 50 to 100 years from now?" (Sephec: A Paving Ground, 2003).

The Harrisons look for things aminis. In 1977, they "looked at the Sacramento River and went along its borders, except it didn't look like a river; it looked like a canal, a big canal." This observation led to their investigation of the entire water system of irrigated agriculture in California's...
Central Valley. It took six months of research in the archives of the Water Resources Center at the University of California, Berkeley, to produce Meditations on the Sacramento River, the Delta, and the Bays of San Francisco (1977). Such research—both the serendipitous encounter and the deliberate search—underpins the Harrisons' work.

"We use a map to meditate," says Newton. In 1998, the Harrisons began a book about the future environment of Europe. The World as a Garden (1999), by putting together a large topographic map. "After a few days spent penciling out the roads and enhancing the rivers, something formerly invisible became very clear," they write. Europe was a peninsula, surrounded by water on three sides, separated from the Russian Plain and the Eurasian continent by rivers and marshes. "The salient feature in the newly visible Peninsula was the high ground, the mountains, the artist saw vibrant streets and dead streets. "Every street that was working well was a promenade," they write. On the dead streets, the "promenade systems—created by people over time" had been broken up by city plans, which alienated street life and made it difficult to access the harbor from the neighborhoods. Reconnecting the promenades became the focus.

The Harrisons regard the notion of promenade as both activity and place, "a stage on which people in a community meet and mix, "turn to a common movement and rhythm," in a collective reaffirmation of community. The promenade is "an arena in which the communal drama can be publicly enacted, an arena in which to experience constancy and change, to define self and group." To break up a promenade system is thus to destroy essential functions that sustain a community. Perhaps the planners and public officials..."
Artists lead walk to tie city together

It wasn’t just a walk, it was a concept

Mayor Scherber joins crowd at Mount Royal Stadium for a promenade through the city.

Seeing the city from a new angle

had thought they were dealing only with streets of asphalt and concrete. When a promenade metaphor was enacted in a citywide performance, it brought forth “a new state of mind” among the participants, including planners and public officials.

Helen and Newton Harrison design their work to bring forth a new state of mind, because the state of mind that created a problem is unlikely to solve that problem and may even prevent people from perceiving it at all. The Harrisons help people see things fresh. To transform what they think is possible. To spark their imagination. To inspire action.

To accomplish these things, the Harrisons bring to bear ingenious strategies of performance and storytelling, and they construct environments that prompt people to see, feel, think, and discover. In Baltimore, they created an exhibit of their proposals with aerial photographs blown up in scale large enough for people to find and touch their own homes. They enacted the work in a citywide performance event that “promenaded the design.” The parade began at the exhibit site and traced the proposed promenade route, stopping at various points, where the Harrisons told stories. A multitude showed up, marching bands played, the mayor joined in. Afterward, the city pledged $5 million to build one section of the proposed promenade, and the Harrisons’ proposal became part of the city’s official plan.

The Harrisons use metaphor not only to guide their own thinking, but also to overturn preconceptions, to challenge conventional thinking, to shock the system. In Green Heart Vision (1994–2001), they took the metaphor from the Dutch themselves, then turned it on them: How can you build on your own Green Heart? To drive the point home, they plotted the proposed plan to build houses on the Green Heart on a map of the country, then reversed the map. Planners were outraged: How could the Harrisons present the map backwards? Because it’s a backward plan informed by backward thinking. Thus was the critique inserted indelibly on people’s minds.

Performance has long been integral to the Harrisons’ work, and it takes many forms. For Meditations on the Sacramento River, the Delta, and the Bay of San Francisco (1977), the performances included putting up posters on streets and public restrooms in San Francisco (“What if all that irrigated farming isn’t necessary?”), commissioning billboards emblazoned with the word WATER, drawing sidewalk graffiti (“Let us tell you a dream. Imagine that all ice has melted, the oceans have risen, civilizations are under stress, and ecosystems are under stress.”), putting advice to public officials in the personal columns of the local newspaper, and telling stories at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The performance at the museum, which consisted of 10 tone poems read by two voices, was an experiment to see “how much information you could compress in a manner that would allow you to read it in a pedestrian way” and thus be the work of “an extreme of complexity.”

Narrative has been central to the Harrisons’ work since the 1970s. The Lagoon Cycle (1974–1984) is an extended narrative of images and words in seven parts. The themes in each narrative—which were created and selected by the Harrisons—include “the history of the earth, the history of the people, and the history of the landscape.” The Harrisons considered the narratives to be “stories of a specialized kind, which were generating a new urban narrative that would underpin all more human urban design.”

The Harrisons’ exhibitions invite touch and are designed to engage body and mind, to make ideas tangible. Maps and photographs are printed large (often eight feet high and many feet longer). Ideally they are hung two to four inches from the ground so that, as people approach, the image joins the floor plane and fills the visual field, which means that people feel as if they can walk right into the map or photograph.

To help people comprehend what was happening to the Sierra Nevada, the artists made a “manifestation on the floor,” where they placed an aerial photograph—44 feet long, of the entire 24,000-square-mile range of the mountains on the floor of the gallery. “In the five or six pieces that it would take to walk from one end to the other, the viewer could see the mountain range from the air—and then, bending down on one knee, see the mass logging operations that were going on.” Meeting the image from the wall to the floor completely changes one’s bodily response to it.

For the exhibit of their Green Heart Vision (1994–2001) for the Netherlands, they placed two eight-foot-square maps side by side on the wall; the “backward” map of the proposal to construct 600,000 houses in the Green Heart and the plan of their own proposal (which portrayed the country in its correct orientation). The floor of the exhibit was an aerial photograph of the entire Green Heart with their proposal superimposed, printed on
Deft tile, so that everyone "could see the location of their own house, their school, or their business" in relation to the Harrisons' proposal. The artists were pleased "to see grandma bring her grandchildren to look at the mappings and crawl around on the floor": a democratization of art, planning, and policy.

The Harrisons' designs for gardens immerse people in an all-encompassing "manifestation," where they can experience ideas directly through the senses. The Garden of Hot Winds and Warm Rains (1996), for example, would provide visitors with a "physical and metaphorical excursion through possible futures," where they could experience the potential effects of projected changes to climate. This was the artists' first "future garden," designed to be part of the Endangered Meadows of Europe (1993–1998), an installation on the roof of Bonn's art museum, The "future garden" was deemed too expensive, but the Endangered Meadows installation, designed to bring alive issues of biodiversity, was planted and inspired the city's park director to ask for another meadow artwork, A Mother Meadow for Bonn, created with seeds from the rooftop meadow.

The Harrisons' works are calls to action, but the artists recognize that "simply having the opportunity to make the proposals" does not mean that they will be implemented. Nevertheless, they have a remarkable record of influential works that have been enacted in policy and in built form. And the projects often give birth to new initiatives.

Their proposal for A Breathing Space for the Sava River (1989–1996) inspired a similar project for the adjoining watershed of the Drava River. Together the two watersheds provide about 50 percent of the clean water for the lower Danube River.

Endangered Meadows of Europe (1993–1998) is no longer installed on the roof of Bonn's art museum, but lives on in the new meadows it has seeded in Bonn and other German cities.

The Green Heart Vision for the Netherlands was shaped after elections in 1994, but ultimately was enacted after a new government came into power in 2000. The vision will affect the entire country for decades to come.

Perhaps most remarkable in terms of its potential impact—in the Sierra Nevada and the world at large—is Sargh: A Proving Ground (2017), a projected 50-year experiment that promises to develop and demonstrate innovative ways to help ecosystems adapt to climate change. It is part of the mission of the Center for the Study of the Force Majeure, which they founded in 2009 at the University of California, Santa Cruz in order to explore "ecologically available responses that will replace, in some measure, the value once provided by disappearing glaciers and snowmelt to river systems and both the ecosystems and the human cultures they support." Projects in the works, yet to be executed, advance this quest. Their proposal for Tibet: The High Ground (2005) for example, would transform lands exposed by retreating glaciers into a waterholding landscape where soil would gradually release water to feed the headwaters of the great rivers.

A "manifestation on the floor"—a 44-foot-long aerial photograph—helps people comprehend the plight of the Sierra Nevada.