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12 Brillig and Contrary Gardens

Laurie Olin

In the architectural design circles gardens are "back." Of course, they never were out for many gardeners, horticulturalists, and generally civilized people of many callings, but for a considerable proportion of landscape architects and architects during the past two decades, they were considered too personal or private in content and too small in scale for serious consideration in academia or practice. As with all generalizations, this one has its exceptions and does not take into account designers as different from each other as Garrett Eckbo and Russell Page. It does, however, reflect the dominant mood and practice of the field of landscape architecture in the recent past. Large-scale land planning, corporate, institutional, and public work, for which most of those practitioners now in their forties and fifties were trained, preoccupied a generation frequently troubled and criticized for their lack of depth regarding plants and fine-grained, sophisticated detailing or, worse, more recently for being concerned with the lack of "art" and ideas in landscape design. The change in taste that accompanies postmodernism and the formalism and symmetry and the architectural elements of the landscape as well as a renewed interest in color, color theory, and horticultural manipulation such as topiary and pleaching that one finds in the studios of our nation's design schools and professional journals today certainly would have astonished and appalled the basic design and history teachers of the 1950s. This, too, will pass, and as this exhibition may indicate, we are already moving into a new and as yet not clearly understood period that will have its own "look" and "feel" in a few years' time.

The changes taking place in design sensibility and the interests evoked by this particular group of designers exemplify some of the emerging sources of form and imagery. Careful study of the work itself will reveal more about the nature of this change than anything I can say or probably than the designers themselves have said. In fact, this particular selection of writings attests to the fact that landscape designers can write as badly and with as much pretension and purple prose as any of the architects currently in print. The work is much more interesting and in nice ways problematical. Here we can see for ourselves that the change taking place is more than one of looks or a mere craving for novelty or newness. The kernel of truth in the statement that the garden is to landscape architecture as the house is to architecture lies in the extent to which it represents the making of a small world that embodies attitudes toward self, community, and the world not of our making that encompasses us. At their best, gardens have turned out to be among the greatest artistic creations of each society through history.

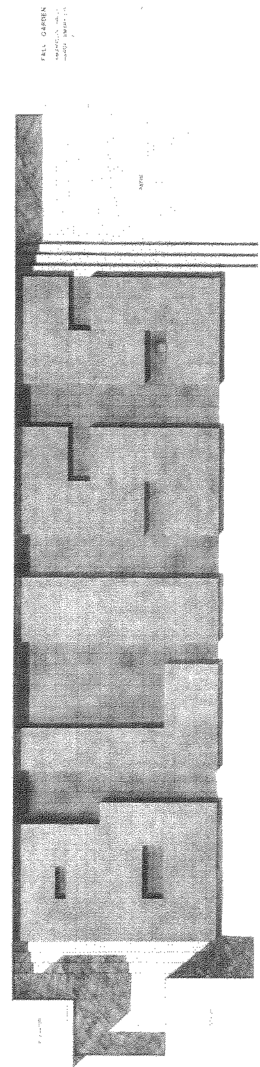
Particular creations come to mind as exemplars of entire civilizations and their world view, such as the villa gardens of Katsura or Lante. It would be foolish and unfair to compare what are essentially *esquisses*, or sketch problems, gathered in this exhibition to such ambitious and fully developed constructions, but in their repeated references to earlier masterpieces or to openly metaphysical notions, it is hard not to, and it is hard not to be critical in the comparison. It is the interest in the garden as a rejuvenated vehicle for formal exploration that demands our attention. Part of this appeal historically has been that one is constrained less in cost and in formal-functional issues than in the architecture of most buildings, and seemingly freed to express personal tastes in the design of small or modestly scaled gardens. Another aspect of the appeal of garden design at this particular moment is the widespread dissatisfaction with so much that has been built in the last forty years, which despite its technical and functional merits has often been aesthetically and sensuously barren. Gardens

by their very nature are primarily concerned with aesthetics and sensory stimulation.

To many of us in the field, it is particularly puzzling that a nation as energetic and pluralistic, or culturally effervescent to the point of near chaos in much of our urban realm, has produced so little diversity or high quality in landscape design since World War II. Architecture has hardly fared better; it only seems so because of the larger number of people in the field and total number of works commissioned and published. Many of us expected regional styles to emerge as a result of the imperatives of geology, climate, soil, plants, and the diversity engendered by ethnicity and population shifts. So far very little has happened to support this view. Why? Surely not the "dead hand" of the past our teachers warned us against, for reexamination of the past is a central tenant of the new practitioners and students. In fact, at the heart of the few strongest regionalist movements in the country today lies a deep concern for local history. A large part of the homogeneity and banality can possibly be laid at the doorstep of the schools with their dogmas and habits perpetuated by a too small cadre of self-reinforcing, long-lived teachers who have been encouraged by the profession to "train" workers for jobs. The mavericks and exceptions to this rule stand out in both their personal manner and the quality and differences in their work: Halprin, Kiley, McHarg, Sasaki, Church, Eckbo, Royston, Haag. With the exception of McHarg, who is known for his contribution to large-scale land planning methodology but who personally has ceaselessly toiled in the marvelous series of riotous gardens at his several residences, all of these individuals who form the central core of postwar design innovation in the United States and who have been aped and emulated endlessly (and terribly) by others have spent considerable time in their formative years in practice designing residential gardens. Many have gone on to do enormous and extraordinary, highly influential work of other sorts, but in each case these are rooted in the exploration of ideas in their early gardens.

It is to be expected, therefore, when a new generation declares itself and wishes to strike out in new directions that one of its vehicles will be the garden. It is, however, a bit disappointing that the work resulting from the current show isn't more adventurous, fresh, or gutsy. There really does seem to be genuine and timeless truth in the *mot* of Francis Bacon. Society does learn to build buildings with sophistication sooner and with more ease than it does to produce gardens or landscape of like nobility. This probably has as much to do with the development of attitudes toward life, the earth, and the engagement of living materials that possess a fulsomeness of their own already as a medium of one's own art and design as it does with anything else. In landscape architecture, there is no such thing as a hypothetical site. All sites are real and particular. Each and every one already is a "place" before one begins to engage in the process of design for some cultural purpose. The degree to which normal, banal, and poor sites are transformed to become memorable, beautiful, and unique or are invested with memories, values, and dreams that can be shared by others is the means by which we measure success in their design. Using this criteria, it is unfortunate that several of these projects are not in fact under construction, because they would contribute a modest but genuine addition to the collective body of garden design that frames our state of mind. Warren Byrd's poetic tidewater garden should exist in a form other than these drawings.

The fractured nervousness or thin and anemic quality of some of the schemes—even while possessing ideas and elements that are valid and praiseworthy in themselves—expresses as clearly, or better



Plan
Martha Schwartz

than lengthy essays could, the mood of the moment regarding the physical and natural world that is held by many. I find the opposing views toward voluptuousness revealed in these twelve works to be one of the most interesting and obvious issues to be raised by them. Most of the designers have eschewed strategies of minimalism and the aesthetics, geometrics, surfaces, and structure so common to a great proportion of midcentury art and architecture. Healey's garden of smells, sounds, and tactile stimulus, Solomon's plunge into lavender, Sullivan's overstuffed larder of shapes, forms and volumes, Falcòn's and Buenos's brash and dazzling color markedly contrast with Krog's, Messervy's, and Schwartz's tough control and self-restraint, which opens the way into an equally strong, highly emotional expressionism, one as notable for its abnegation as for its offerings.

If, as I have implied earlier, for too long there has been insufficient diversity, discourse, and debate in the field of landscape architecture concerning design expressions and theory, then one must welcome, as I do, an exhibition such as this that presents some of the elements necessary for such discourse and debate. If sensory stimulation is an issue addressed openly in many of these schemes, so, too, there is a nascent regional expression in this work, and not of a folksy vernacular sort but a more sophisticated cultural and biophysical one. Consider Harkness trying to draw an aesthetic out of the prairie farmstead, Falcòn's and Buenos's Latin topicality versus Byrd's eastern shore construct with its echoes of colonial and enlightenment dreams, or Schwartz's streetwise rooftop gesture, with its sassy and changeable economy of means. This all bodes well for the field.

There are, in my view, three weaknesses in the works exhibited that should not pass unnoticed. One is the underlying premise that flowers be used somehow as the vehicle for an exploration of new possibilities in garden design. The second is the misuse or misunderstanding of the relationship between drawing and design, or for that matter what most of us conventionally understand as physical reality. The third is an attempt to appropriate compositional strategies currently fashionable in architecture. First, who doesn't like flowers, or at least some particular ones, and what can one do with them that hasn't already been done yet by generations of gardeners and designers? That's a tough one. Flowering plants (angiosperms) comprise most of what we usually think of as the vegetation of the world, certainly of the gardener's palette (excluding, of course, algae, mosses, ferns, cycads, and conifers); grasses, palms, cacti, and most shrubs and trees flower as well as the smaller "herbaceous" flowers of the garden. At the moment I write this, a red maple is in spectacular bloom outside the window, glowing with a cloud of tiny coral blossoms; the elms nearby are dipped in a soft pale fuzz of petals. Because of their scale and texture, as well as the seasonal dynamics of visible form (and its absence), flowers are one of the best examples of the recurrent cycles of life, of the seasons resulting from planetary movement. On the other hand, despite memorable lilac walks, wisteria arbors, laburnum allées, and the vast broderies of European baroque gardens, most herbaceous flowers, or the others for that matter, are not generally suited to the creation of three-dimensional spatial structures but to two-dimensional patterns of color or texture. In one way or another, the creators of the most successful designs here largely ignore flowers in the formulation of the underlying spatial structure of their schemes. This is probably because of their implicit understanding that the fundamental difference between designing a garden or landscape and the activity of gardening or horticulture is that of creating spatial arrangements and structures.

The second problem is one also easily dealt with: representation versus that which is represented. Drawings are inherently abstract, even when striving for verisimilitude. Several of these schemes profit from their graphic representation and several suffer terribly. Barbara Stauffacher Solomon's drawings by now are something of a small cult item, and museums have begun collecting them. What is represented, however, is rarely that remarkable, but she focuses our attention on aspects of things that give one a desire to see them. For several years I have had a growing desire to see if she can translate any of this into something physical that is as good as the source of its inspiration and all of its forms, Mediterranean agriculture and renaissance gardens. Of the schemes that suffer, the worst are those of Burton, Harkness, and Van Valkenburgh, which present strong visceral or even cerebral ideas about physicality in the most vapid, precious, or anemic drawings. It is hard not to dislike a project like Van Valkenburgh's, which claims to be about life, color, texture, and bustle, but is presented in a vacant white model and parboiled drawings. Burton's scheme may be feverish and Jungian in its imagined combination of criminals and scientists, brambles, caves, and water oozing on walls, but it is weak and sickly in its graphic evocation. We never really believe in it, but we could have with more effort and understanding of the

physicality of her ideas and their representation. Krog, as usual, presents a genuinely interesting scheme, but with extraneous accompanying art/talk chitchat that doesn't advance his case at all. Like Yeats and his beliefs in Rosicrucianism, we are not interested or compelled by the things that get him going, but in the results. I am not entranced by a bronze cube as a representation of a clipped chestnut. I accept it because it is an interesting model that relates to the ideas of a limited palette. For that matter, wood, cork, plastic, cardboard, styrofoam, and dillweed would not do a better job it seems. One of the dilemmas of the field since antiquity has been the difficulty of depicting phenomena that are various, multiple, spatial, and unlike objects such as buildings, which rarely can be seen from an external position and which generally engulf or surround us in ways far more diffuse and extensive than do buildings. Even in a small garden, such as many of these are, the plan and section tell us as much as a multiplicity of views or a model, and yet it is the views that correlate more directly with experience, despite their fragmentary limitations.

Finally, a word about borrowing too directly from contemporary architectural practice. It would be foolish for me to attempt an analysis of architectural design composition and its theory in the twentieth century, but there are several noticeable characteristics that are relevant to this exhibition. Borrowing from early twentieth-century avant-garde painting, architects have heavily exploited three compositional strategies: collage (and its corollary, fragmentation), displacement and deformation, as exemplified in surrealism, and asymmetry, especially as practiced in de Stijl and constructivist works. Regardless of the motive, the result of the first two have been to assault objects, breaking them down, often into a new field or series of new and transformed objects. In effect this has frequently led from a space-occupying phenomenon to that of a space creating one, such as a head or a building transformed into a landscape. The difficulty of performing such operations upon that which is already spatially extensive and nonobjective can best be seen in the work of Gabriel Guvrekian or Mallet-Stevens. Ironically, when one systematically inverts the relationships between the parts of a landscape with the same logic as Picasso, it leads to an implosion and the objectification of that landscape, finally producing bizarre results, such as those of Guvrekian's garden of light. As Church, Eckbo, Burle-Marx, and Kiley have demonstrated so clearly in their work, certain spatial reconfigurations were easy to accommodate, especially those of the "dynamic asymmetry" sort, producing fresh and energetic compositions. Today the de Stijl patterns of Kiley's Miller house and the surrealist pool and sculpture of the Donnell garden seem timeless classics with the authority of earlier styles and cultures. More problematic are current attempts to incorporate the fracturing and superimposition of fragments appropriated from popular culture, archaeology, and the catalogue of design history so prevalent in building design. These strategies have moved buildings toward the achievement of properties associated with successful and highly evolved landscapes. Beyond making caricatures or burlesques of themselves, in what ways will such strategies advance the design of landscapes? As we have recently seen in the work of Hargreaves, who has appropriated nearly every one of these strategies—surrealist dislocation, fragmentation and displacement, asymmetries, color patterning, etc.—a postmodern landscape such as these studies suggest is buildable and worth doing. Whether it will be lovable or lasting is another issue and in many cases not an appropriate question.

The show succeeds largely to the degree that it raises so many good and bothersome questions, that it stimulates one to dissatisfaction, with both what is the general state of the art and much of what is proposed here as an antidote.