

Thicket (1991), by FASTWÜRMS collective members Kim Kozzi and Dai Skuse, is named after an Old English word for a dense community of plants. It features a diversity of plants that express, in the artists' words, "dense contrast and contradictions: cultivated and wild, wet and dry, love and hate, red and green. Qualities epitomized in the thickness of our feeling for the rose bush; from the soft perfume, gentle petals and the poetry of bright flowers, to the tangled thought of dark brambles, and the cruelty of thorns."

Karyn Morris' *Whimsical Shore* (1992) recreates the landscape that once bordered Lake Ontario. Two plant beds lie horizontal to the lake's shoreline and feature a sandy beachfront lined with ornamental grass and sumac trees fancifully interpreting plants that might be found by a lakeshore.

The concepts for these gardens spring from either an implied or explicit literary source, whether the poetry of the word "thicket" and its associations, a description of the landscape that once bordered Lake Ontario, or descriptions of the original forests of southern Ontario. These gardens build their visual richness on aesthetic and historical associations that appear to have resonance for Ontarians.

The local critical responses, however, show confusion about how to think about gardens whose intention is to recognize or comment upon humankind's manipulation of nature and the garden form itself. In 1992, H. Fred Dale, the gardening writer for the *Toronto Star*, indicated that *The Domestic Wilderness* was his favorite work because "while many others were more art than gardening, you could replicate this in your backyard, and find it attractive all year." Architecture writer Christopher Hume, also with the *Toronto Star*, found the 1992 gardens thoughtful and full of good intentions, but as gardens, he found them curiously lacking in appeal. "What we get here is a sense of gardens about gardens. Plants and flowers are no longer considered for their esthetic or practical qualities, but for their political connotations."

Ron Benner's 1993 garden continues the tradition of political comment. *All That Has Value* examines the importance of systems of classification that shape our knowledge and valuation of plants. The garden contains trees, flowers, and vegetables that are native to the Americas and have specific economic value. Benner shows us vegetables that have gained notoriety in European countries but have originated in the Americas, for example, the "Irish" potato that comes from Peru.

While the four gardens described above take the subject of "garden" and examine its contemporary social and economic meanings and its relationship to landscape, the artists have also capitalized successfully on the garden's traditional aesthetic form. They have created gardens that are visually satisfying as well as instructive.

Several of Harbourfront's gardens have attempted to use the garden form to create a new object without adequately acknowledging the garden's intrinsic values (its "subject"); these are consequently less satisfying.

It's as if the artists have created works with a new tool they have not entirely mastered. Simple plants may be weighed down by too much conceptual baggage. One particularly heavy-handed example is a 1993 work composed of a wood therapy couch and a wood therapist's chair occupied by a tree, both encircled by native aspens. The ensemble is meant to represent "the cathartic and emotionally uplifting effect that trees have on us."

Harbourfront Centre plans to continue the popular "Artist's Gardens" series with the ongoing support of Sheridan Nurseries, which donates all of the plant stock. Larry Sherk, a master horticulturalist who has worked with artists since the inception of the project, enjoys working with them because "they are making horticulturally interesting use of the plants. I don't want the gardens looking like parks department flowerbeds." Harbourfront Centre's own grounds crew maintains the gardens.

Two other noteworthy gardens that will be permanent additions to the urban landscape are under construction in Saint Paul, MN, and Alexandria, VA.

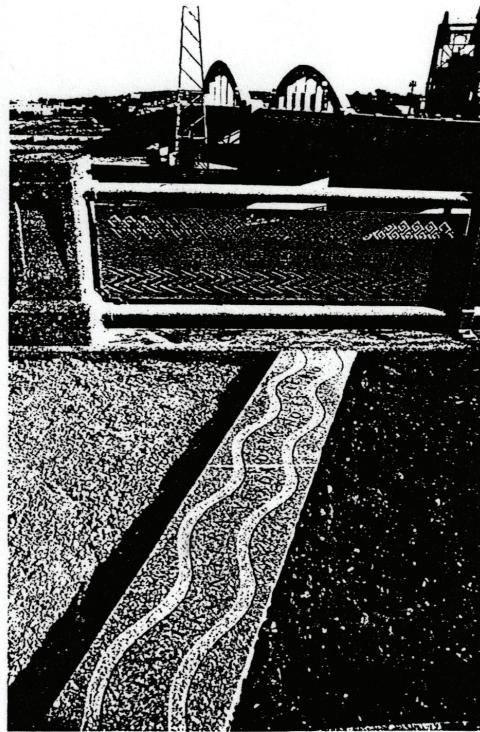
Commemorative Poetry Garden, Saint Paul, MN

Artist Cliff Garten, in collaboration with poets Roberta Hill-Whiteman, Soyini Guyton, Sandra Benitez, David Mura, Xeng Sue Yang, and John Minczeski, has designed a "Commemorative Garden" to be located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River in downtown Saint Paul. The project has been funded by the Saint Paul Foundation and developed in cooperation with the City of Saint Paul and Ramsey County.

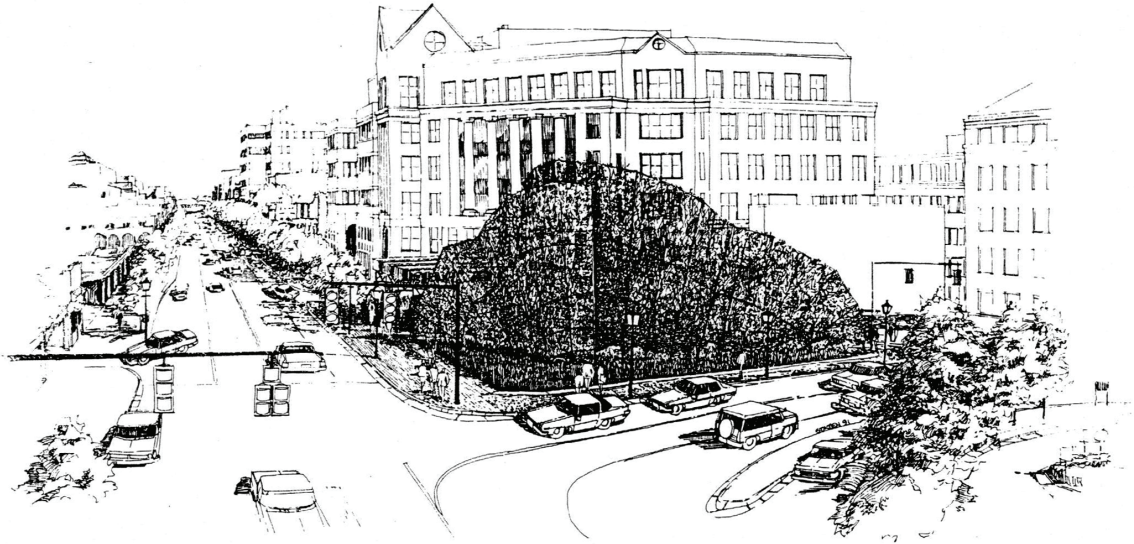
The intention of the project is to create a public place—a garden—that celebrates cultural differences and asks us to consider our own personal histories in the context of a many-valued community. Garten comments, "A memorial should give us back information about ourselves and make us ask questions about what we are memorializing. Just as there is no single author of history, there is no single author of this memorial. As an artist, I have been fascinated by the relationship between text and image. While the poetry garden is a dialog

between sculpture and poetry, the poets' texts and their experience of the site were the impetus for the design—each poet saw something different in the landscape."

The design involves a series of six interlocking granite rectangles on the ground plane, suggesting the joining of hands and the linking of individual voices. Each of the six spaces belongs to an individual poet and is identified by internal shapes and sculptures that support the poet's text, etched into granite. Each poet's work is further represented by poetry and patterning in the iron railing surrounding the site. Cultural symbols from the texts are alluded to through various structures in the garden. For the viewer, the spatial/sculptural experience becomes part of the "reading of the space." The garden will be completed in fall 1993.



Cliff Garten, *Commemorative Garden*, (detail, under construction), Kellogg Mall Park, St. Paul, MN, 1993 (photo: Chris Faust)



Buster Simpson, Laura Sindell, Mark Spitzer, Becca Hanson, *King Street Gardens*, (preliminary drawing), 1991. (drawing: courtesy Mark Spitzer)

ers, and partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Virginia Commission on the Arts. *King Street Gardens Park* will be constructed by private developers on land that is owned by the city.

According to architect Mark Spitzer, the design had three goals: first to re-establish some portion of the wetlands which had been lost; then to provide opportunities for socialization genuine enough that the space will draw people to it; and finally, to express the values and history of the ongoing development project.

The team's design includes a marsh, seen both as a museum piece that recalls the site's past ecology and as a collection basin for water. A grid of trellises combining formal and informal geometries and relating to the surrounding street grid provides a framework for flowering vines. Borrowing the sculptural qualities of George Washington's three-cornered hat for the three-cornered site, the design features a topiary form that pays homage to the nation's first president, who first surveyed and platted Alexandria. The topiary three-cornered hat will provide a welcoming gateway to the site. *King Street Gardens* will be constructed in two phases and completed by summer 1994.

While gardens may first elicit an aesthetic impulse because they appeal to our senses of sight and smell, the design of these artists' gardens also exhibit form and order, consciousness and deliberation. They have additional intentions. While the Harbourfront Centre gardens take the historical, social, and economic meanings of garden and landscape as their subject, the Saint Paul and Alexandria gardens intend to produce a new type of civic space. All these works attempt to create garden forms that not only balance the expectations of the senses and the requirements of the intellect but also acknowledge the complexity and contradictions of a contemporary, postmodern society still dreaming of the garden of Eden.

Suggested from Our Readers:

Duluth, Minnesota sculptor Ben Effinger—
 • Hiroaki Yamashita, *Ancient Grace—Inside the Cedar Sanctuary of Yakushima Island*. (Location, ST: Cadence Books, 1992). A picture book of the otherworldly sculptural forms of nature in a cedar sanctuary on a Japanese island that receives over 700 inches of rainfall per year.

Public Art Review managing editor Bruce Wright—

• June, 1992 issue of *Environnemental* magazine published in Brussels, Belgium, focuses upon "Le Nôtre...et puis?" Written mostly in French, with some English, this special issue examines the legacy of Le Nôtre (who designed Versailles) to European landscape architecture as the year 2000 approaches. Le Nôtre, who worked with the architect Le Vau, decorative artist Lebrun, and numerous sculptors and fresco artists, integrated all the arts in his designs for public spaces.

Public Art Review project manager Jack Becker—

• Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester, Jr., eds., *The Meaning of Gardens* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). A wide-ranging selection of essays under chapter headings including "Faith," "Power," "Ordering," "Cultural Expression," "Personal Expression," and "Healing."

Saint Paul artist Cliff Garten—

• Two essays from *Landscape Journal* are highly recommended. Patrick M. Condon, "Radical Romanticism," v. 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991), poses a dialectic between nature and culture that turns the notion of "garden" inside out. James Corner, "A Discourse on Theory II: Three Tyrannies of Contemporary Theory and the Alternative of Hermeneutics," v. 10, no. 2 (Fall 1991), examines the crisis of meaning in contemporary culture and possibilities for "regaining ground" through endeavors in the landscape.

And my most interesting recent reads—

• Myra Mayman and Cathleen McCormick, *Five Views: One Landscape*. (Cambridge, MA: Office for the Arts at Harvard and Radcliffe, 1992). Critical case studies of five projects undertaken on the Radcliffe Quadrangle by landscape architects Michael Van Valkenburgh and Martha Schwartz, and artists Ross Miller, Bert Snow, and Marty Cain.

• Michael Pollan, *Second Nature - A Gardener's Education* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing/Laurel Paperback, 1991). Topical essays grouped by season. In particular, see Chapter 10, "The Idea of a Garden," pp. 209-38.

• Richard Westmancott, *African—American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Fascinating ethnographic study of gardening traditions that explores the thoughts and impulses behind each design, focusing on the concept of the garden as a place serving specific functional needs and also expressing values, aesthetic preferences, and spiritual beliefs.

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Notes:

1. For a critical review of the landscape/environmental work at Shakopee Correctional Institution, see "The Garden of Time—A Mystical Garden in the Shadow of a Women's Prison," by Kate Christianson, *Inland Architect*, (September/October, 1992), pp. 44-6.
2. Yi Fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful—Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Washington, D.C./Covelo, CA: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1993), pp. 7-8.
3. Tuan, p. 8.