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AN ARTFUL EXPERIMENT

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By Bernard St-Denis and Peter Jacobs, FASLA

LES JARDINS DE MÉTIS (REFORD GARDENS) presented its 10th annual Garden Festival last summer with an unprecedented 20 garden projects, including eight new creations as well as one showpiece installed at the Place de la Dauversière in Montreal.

The festival has raised fundamental questions about gardens and the relationship of garden making and art from its inception in 2000. The original intention was to provide a venue for landscape architects, architects, and artists from around the world to experiment freely with the forms and materials of the garden, redefining the garden's capacity to express our visions of nature. Trying to clarify how this challenge might advance garden concepts, design, and forms has been central to the mission of the festival.

Over the years, the annual call for proposals has produced an astounding array of original, insightful, refreshing, and playful propositions. Most have raised questions relevant to contemporary garden making in our time: What are the narrative strategies and devices that can best convey a garden's appeal to the

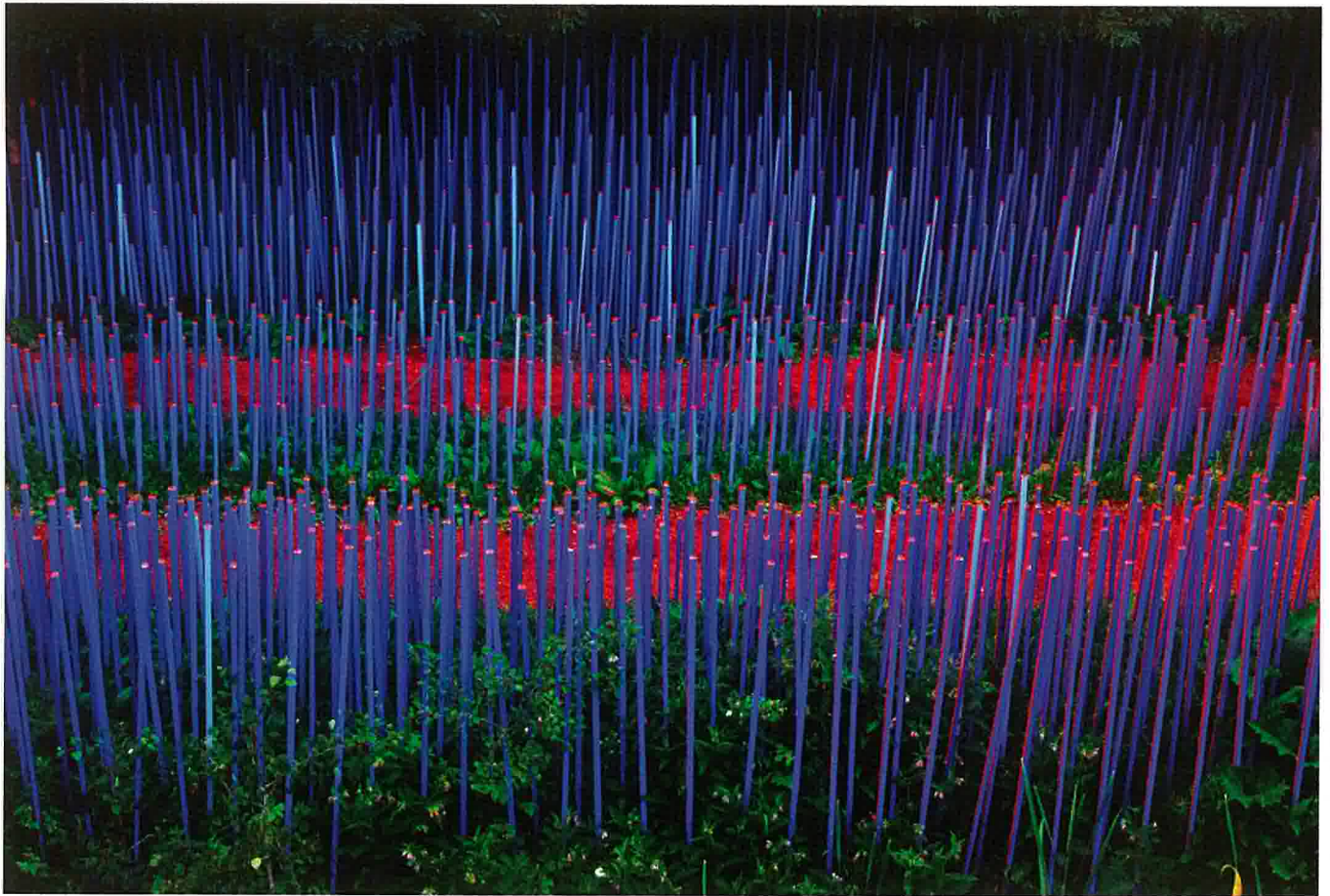
broader social and natural context? How can meaning emerge from the experience of gardens considering the potential interplay between sensual properties, signs, context, and the behavior of visitors? To what degree can visitors actually shape meaning by manipulating garden forms and elements? In short, how does the garden experience translate into meaning? And apart from the fact that we expect contemporary gardens to “mean” something,

what are they all about? How can they point to ideas about our world in ways that other media cannot? What do the past traditions and present practices of garden making bring to our understanding of social, economic, and environmental concerns?

A majority of the works presented over the 10 years of festival activity has dealt with these questions. Some have done so directly, others indirectly. *Hybrids, Reshaping the Contemporary Garden in Métis* was published in 2007 under the direction of Leslie Johnstone, former artistic director of the festival. This book presents more than 40 gardens created between 2000 and 2006. It includes

BASCULE: LES ONDÉES ARATOIRES ◀ (2006–2009)

CEDULE 40 is a collective of artists from the Saguenay region in Quebec (Julien Boily, Etienne Boulanger, Sonia Boudreau, Noémie Payant-Hébert). A huge yellow swing was erected over a longitudinal gap in a rectangular plot. Atop the swing, two reservoirs of barley seeds were connected to dispensers activated by the movement of the swing. As visitors used the swing, seeds were spread over patches of soil on both sides of the gap. A dense carpet of barley gradually formed on the surface of the site as the season progressed, framing the narrow space between overhead and ground-level views. The experience was playful, refreshingly reminiscent of childhood, and somewhat exhilarating. Visitors literally put the landscape in motion. The project highlights the often-overlooked fact that landscapes are the result of our collective and most basic actions.



THE BLUE STICK GARDEN (2000/2009) ▲

CLAUDE CORMIER'S Blue Stick Garden, presented in the first edition of the festival, became an instant success with visitors and critics alike. It offered an abstract and visually powerful interpretation of the perennial border that frames the Allée Royale in the nearby historic garden created by Elsie Reford. More than 3,000 sticks mimic the shape and volume of a perennial garden set around a looped path. Three sides of the sticks were painted with different shades of blue, while the fourth side was painted a bright orange. As one entered the path, a rhythmic field of blue sticks extended above the ground cover and framed all sides of the garden. As the path returned, the blue suddenly turned to orange and the overall lighting conditions seemed drastically altered. One discovered the key to the color coding only upon completing the loop, where the visitor was faced with the same combination in a specimen of the rare blue poppy species, the emblem of Reford Gardens. The garden's astute mix of clarity and simplicity, striking visual, historical reference, and symbolic appeal have made it an icon of the festival.

LE JARDIN DU REPOS (2000) ►

ARCHITECTS PLANT/BRANCH PLANT (Christopher Pummer, Lisa Rapoport, and Mary Tremain) focused on providing visitors with a variety of landscape experiences that best revealed the unique character of the site. They imagined a series of devices and furniture designed to enhance the perception of certain features. Visitors were invited to lie on a bench above an escarpment to hear waves hit the

ocean shore below, to stretch under the ever-changing sky on a "garden bed" in the middle of a field of silver artemisia, and to sit on a log bench in an intimate space between a screen and a dense group of trees. These settings were not conceived as part of a garden composition, but rather as experiential prompts that opened the visitors' receptiveness to the nature of the site. All materials and artifacts used were reminiscent of the regional and historical context of the site. This garden demonstrated how a sense of place can emerge at the intersection of perceptual experience and memory.



© 2000, LOUISE TANGUAY, "JARDIN DE MÉTIS/REFORD GARDENS, TOP." © 2000, MICHEL LAVERDIÈRE, "JARDINS DE MÉTIS/REFORD GARDENS, BOTTOM."



several texts from designers and artists that address their intentions and outline their conceptual frameworks. In the end, each of the design participants faced the same implicit question, apparently simple but actually quite complex: What, after all, is a garden? The answers have been tentative, suggesting that the notion of garden is pretty much up for grabs, as is any sense of how to approach the garden as a contemporary phenomenon.

One reason may be that many of the “gardens” presented (and this year was no exception) have been much closer to artistic “installations” than to the common notion of “garden” (see, for instance, *Le Macroscop*). This crossover between categories was almost inevitable given the open nature of the festival’s an-

LE MACROSCOPE (2004) ▲

PIERRE BÉLANGER’S contribution to the festival was one of the most radical. On a plane stretching from the entrance to the belvedere overlooking the river, *Le Macroscop* consisted of a flatbed elevator (a skyjack) installed at one end of a bright orange tarpaulin carpet. Visitors could stand on the platform that rose almost 50 feet above the ground to offer a commanding view of the festival, of the Reford Gardens to the west, of the majestic river, and of the cultivated fields rolling in the distance to the south. The project provided an immediate and startling understanding of the relationship between site and region, between geographic circumstances and human settlements, between natural forces and cultural means of adaptation. It also highlighted the context and juxtaposition of the historic and the contemporary gardens. *Le Macroscop* was highly incongruous for a garden festival. Yet it offered a straightforward opportunity to contextualize and thus more acutely grasp the significance of the ground-level experience of the gardens as well as the regional context.

nual call for proposals and the diversity of backgrounds sought in the selection of the participants. Moreover, the format of the festival relied on the presentation of “instant” gardens that were to last only one or, at the most, a few seasons. As a result, designers and artists have generally downplayed the creative use of plants in favor of artificial materials, structures, and elements combined to allude to the natural realm (*Seedling*) and to garden traditions, to point forcefully to the artificial nature of the garden, or to support various narratives, some of them remotely related to gardens. Thus, a good number of the “gardens” were in fact conceived as “installations” about gardens, garden making, the landscape, the environment





SAFE ZONE (2006–2009) ▲

SAFE ZONE, by Stoss Landscape Urbanism (Chris Reed, ASLA, Chris Muskopf, Scott Bishop, and Kristin Malone), explored the possibilities offered by some of the materials that are now widely used to protect users of public spaces from bodily harm. For instance, play spaces designed for children have incorporated an array of soft surfaces and protective devices that are now quite familiar, but that are generally used in a very straightforward way. Safe Zone showed how those and the attendant visual language (signs, colors, graphics used to signal potential danger) can bring character and whimsy to the garden. The designers poured rubber mats over mounds and hollows, strapped adjacent trees with cushions, and spread ground rubber in low spots, all in contrasting colors. The resulting abstract, visually arresting, miniature topography invited playful, energetic, and sometimes hazardous body movement. Children running and jumping enthusiastically all over the garden testified to its cleverness.

BOIS DE BIAIS (2006–2009) ◀

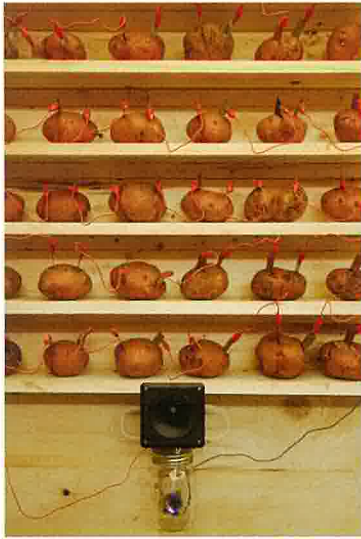
BUILT ON AN EXPANDED TRACT along the north–south axis leading to the river, Bois de biais was the closest approximation of the prototypical garden. It was almost entirely covered with tree shoots, some merging with an adjacent birch grove. A bench in a clearing among a very dense group of poplars allowed for a place of restful meditation. The contorted pathway leading to the clearing produced a sense of disorientation, confronting visitors with the mixed geometries of the poplar plantings and the adjacent rows of willow alternated with wooden trails. The combination of the insistent rhythms inscribed on the ground, the perfectly marked diagonal axes, and the lightness of the regular tree structure added to a sense of visual complexity. The spatial definition of the garden appeared to elude any synthesis; one was forced to move and look in all directions just to understand and capture the complexity of the space. Atelier Le Balto (Marc Pouzol, Véronique Faucheur, and Marc Vatinel) managed to promote an acute awareness of body movement and orientation through space while offering, in a limited area, a condensed juxtaposition of spatial types.

and our use of it (Bascule, les ondées aratoires), or about the history and spirit of the Reford Gardens (The Blue Stick Garden).

Yet none of the contributions of the past 10 years was without impact on the way we can or might imagine gardens. Nearly all of them dealt with the way nature is consumed, transformed, looked at, symbolized, and, in the end, inhabited in one culture or another. Some of them have reinterpreted elements of past garden traditions and recent trends in landscape architecture in striking ways. Others have successfully appropriated different artistic precedents and trends and shown how they could shape the garden and add to its already manifold meanings (Passe-moi un sapin Rita). Of course, many were close to what we expect of gardens in terms of spatial structure and qualities (Bois de biais). But they offered new perspectives on the use of plants that appealed to their significance beyond the purely aesthetic (working

with vegetables, for instance, as in Pomme de parterre), unusual juxtapositions of plants and commonplace or high-tech manufactured materials (Safe Zone), as well as explorations into the full sensory-motor spectrum (Le jardin du repos, Dymaxion sleep).

Overall, the gardens/installations have provided stimulating images and experiences designed to raise



POMME DE PARTERRE (2007–2009)

ANGELA IAROCCI, CLAIRE IRONSIDE, AND DAVID ROSS, respectively landscape architect, architect, and artist, have rejuvenated our perception of the common potato. In a spacious garden room, they staked out a regular parterre planted with 13 heirloom species of the tuber, all identified with a descriptive card. In the middle of the carpet of potato foliage, a partially buried wood cellar housed shelf upon shelf of scrupulously aligned potatoes, all connected with electrical wires. This jumbo version of the potato battery anyone can build at home fed several speakers at the bottom of the cellar walls. The speakers alternately emitted brief electronic sounds that filled the room with a strange, slow pulse. Overall, the project appealed to the imagination on several levels. First, it directly challenged us to realize that the common vegetable we consume regularly is not as generic as we thought. Second, it brought to the fore the unsuspected potential of plants to expand our very limited perspectives on energy supply. Third, it offered a very peculiar, immediate, and poetic sense of the “life” in the potato and, by extension, in plants in general.



© 2007, ROBERT BARONET, JARDINS DE MÉTIS/REFORD GARDENS, TOP; © 2007, MICHEL LAVERDIÈRE, JARDINS DE MÉTIS/REFORD GARDENS, CENTER; BERNARD ST-DENIS, BOTTOM



PASSE-MOI UN SAPIN RITA
(2008/2009)

THE DESIGN TEAM KNOWN AS RITA (Stéphane Halmaï-Voisard, Francis Rollin, and Karine Corbeil) went pop with *Passe-moi un sapin Rita*. The original version supplied visitors with oversized, styrofoam replicas of the perfumed cardboard spruce silhouettes many people have seen suspended on the rear-view mirror of their uncle's car. Visitors were encouraged to plant their giant equivalent in the ground, between the real trees of a young forest. A grid of specially made sockets allowed for their rearrangement at will. The invitation to "plant a tree" may have served as a reminder of how global environmental concerns require small-scale individual actions. Or the infiltration of a real forest with icons of kitsch, posing as surrogate trees, could have been a playful wink to our consumer culture endlessly recycling nature into images of "naturalness" to seduce and to market products.



If there is a garden lesson to be learned from the festival, it is that the language of gardens is unpredictable and inexhaustible.

awareness that, whatever the appearance of a garden, its status and meaning depend on our capacity to appreciate how it relates symbolically to our collective experience. In other words, a garden will distill a certain sense of nature only insofar as we allow ourselves to be caught up in its particular symbolic mode. If there is a garden lesson to be learned from the festival, it is that the language of



gardens is unpredictable and inexhaustible. Furthermore, the garden traditions of the past have no absolute privilege over our frames of reference, which, in our decentered world, have become infinitely diverse. Thus, garden making today is confronted with the dual task of framing experience and providing implicit and explicit clues to meaning with whatever means available. Among these, deconstructing the notion of the garden and stretching it, working with hybrid types of expression and emphasizing artifice, have been favored by the participants to the festival.

One outcome has been the constant reminder that gardens are anything but “natural.” The argument was made repeatedly, in work and in words. What this tells us, really, is that we haven’t stepped very far beyond the 1970s wholesale rejection of anything naturalistic or picturesque, when landscape architecture met land art and subse-

quently pursued artistic legitimacy and semiotic performance. After 40 years of landscape and garden design supported by the ongoing search for both, experimenting with garden types to make such a point still appears liberating.

However, something is missed in the process. It is true that the “natural looking” garden has had an enduring hold on garden tastes and imagination. But it doesn’t follow that gardens were, or can ever be, mistaken for pieces of unchecked nature. The Picturesque tradition, for instance, relied on artifice (or “art”) like any other garden tradition before or after, although to a different degree. Its paradoxical stand on art was that it had to withdraw under the appearances of rustic and “free” nature. Yet the picturesque garden didn’t just display natural forms. It offered carefully designed, life-size renditions of a mostly fictional, unusually “spirited” nature, which

SEEDLING (2009) ▲

ARCHITECTS AND ARTISTS Mateo Pinto and Carolina Cisneros teamed up with landscape architect Victoria Marshall to create *Seedling*, an abstract fable about the wonder of plant growth initiated as a seed. On a carpet of pine needles, dozens of fluorescent green traffic cones were placed on a quasi-regular grid to cover the entire ground of one of the garden rooms set along a cliff overlooking the St. Lawrence River. From each of the cones, a tuft of curved cables and strings shot up, all shiny, slender, and flexible. They formed an amazingly intricate and delicate volume overhead, which was highlighted by the ever-changing light and the background of trees. The lightness and radiance of that volume added significantly to the already serene character of the room. The cones and a few strips of white and yellow plastic fibers provided a touch of liveliness. One was encouraged to absorb the ambiance while reflecting on the garden’s metaphoric allusion to plant life, which relied on a witty analogy between the traffic cones and pinecones found in the forests nearby.

appealed to both the senses and the cultural imagination. Over centuries, gardens have embodied different mythical, idealized, or fantasized representations of the natural world. In a substantial way, they have done so with nature's own materials. Both these aspects seem to elude a majority of the self-reflexive experiments in garden making displayed over the years.

One would wish that the festival offered more garden fictions that would allow us to dwell unashamedly in our collective myths and yearnings related to our place in nature. The narratives encountered at Métis over the years have expanded our understanding of the issues at stake in garden making, but they have generally shied away from introducing genuine garden prototypes. On the other hand, some of the most provocative and memorable propositions were those that critically exposed the assumptions behind garden making or broke loose altogether from any preconception about gardens. Obviously, the clarification of the meaning and value of the con-

temporary garden requires that kind of disruption of beliefs. Fortunately for us, the festival has grown into a bona fide institution that can provide both.

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DYMAXION SLEEP (2009) ▼

IN 1946, architect Richard Buckminster Fuller invented the Dymaxion world map, a new geometrical projection of the entire surface of the earth. The Dymaxion map inspired landscape architect Jane Hutton and artist and urban designer Adrian Blackwell to develop a structure based on the unfolding of a polyhedron, on which a net was suspended so visitors could lie, stretch, and relax over a series of planting beds. The plants under the net were all of highly aromatic species. To any unsuspecting visitor, the complex and intriguing but very controlled structure over the planting beds was bound to be quite startling. But as one climbed on the structure and started moving around the nets to settle in, the presence of the aromas was immediately, strongly perceived. The nets encouraged one to lie down and to bask in the full aromatic palette of the garden, providing one of the most convincing investigations into the multisensorial aspects of garden experience.

Resources

- "The Artful Garden," by Di-anne Bos; *Landscape Architecture*, December 2002.
- "Gardens at the Outer Edge," by Bernard St-Denis and Peter Jacobs, FASLA; *Landscape Architecture*, November 2005.
- Les Jardins de Métis, or Reford Gardens, www.jardinsmetis.com/english.
- "Seeds of Future Gardens," by Peter Jacobs, FASLA; *Landscape Architecture*, December 2001.
- "When Is a Garden Not a Garden?" by Peter Jacobs, FASLA; *Landscape Architecture*, October 2003.

