# Led Down The Garden Path

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These twelve gardens are far more interesting as a group than as individual expressions of separate designers. As conceptual projects, they display a range of theoretical concerns that is both serious and refreshing, addressing issues as varied as the danger of nuclear war and the sensuous pleasures provided by flowers. As a group, they express some of the current interests of the profession of landscape architecture. In their display of a range of approaches to garden design, they also demonstrate the way in which ideas about the landscape are developed and refined.

Changes in design ideas come from a combination of two sources. Within a particular design discipline, one source is the investigation of forms and ideas inherent in the definition of the discipline itself. The other is the importation of forms and ideas from outside the conventional boundaries of the discipline. The interaction of these forces is a partial explanation of many significant developments in the history of the designed landscape. For example, the formal, Italianate residential garden common in America in the first few decades of the twentieth century was replaced in the 1940s and 1950s by the asymmetrical residential landscape influenced by modern ideals of flowing space and informal suburban life, notions that had not previously been associated with landscape architecture.

Changes in design ideas come from a combination of two sources. Within a particular design discipline, such as architecture or landscape architecture, one source is the investigation of ideas and traditions inherent in the definition of the discipline itself. In landscape work this includes the nature of the landscape itself, the materials of the landscape, landscape types such as garden or park, and cultural notions associated with historic landscape forms.

The other source of change is the importation of forms and ideas from outside the traditional boundaries of the discipline. These ideas may come from other artistic fields, such as sculpture or architecture, or they may be adapted from more distant fields, such as literature or science. Sometimes these externally generated ideas are completedly transformed in the service of a conventional landscape ideal, while in other cases the tension between the conventional and new sources is a visible element of the design.

Both tendencies are usually present in some form in every designed artifact, although every discipline goes through phases when one or the other predominates. The history of the designed landscape in America offers numerous examples of these shifts. For example, the formal, Italianate residential garden common in the first few decades of the twentieth century was modeled explicitly on the landscape prototype of the Renaissance garden in Italy. This prototype was replaced in the 1940s and 1950s by the asymmetrical residential landscape influenced by modern ideals of flowing space and informal suburban life, notions that had not previously been associated with landscape design.

In the 1960s the residential landscape faded in importance to the profession of landscape architecture. It was replaced by a concern for ecology and the environment as a whole, codified by Ian McHarg in *Design with Nature*. With its basis in a scientific view of the landscape, McHarg's approach lacked an explicit aesthetic philosophy. This lack was a severe handicap in the design of smaller scale urban or residential projects, a problem the environmental design disciplines are now trying to remedy.

The focus of this exhibition on the garden demonstrates an increased interest in the more conventional, aesthetically motivated spectrum of landscape ideas. It is partially a response

to the limitations of the ecologically based planning approach of Ian McHarg. It also acknowledges several other aspects of contemporary design and theory: the architects' revived interest in history and the garden and the interest of many artists in working outside the gallery in the larger landscape.

The majority of the projects in this show address the ideas of the garden in an explicit, conventional way. Most of them use the elements of traditional garden design to investigate new contexts or new rhetorical content without compromising the viewer's ability to recognize them as gardens. The clearest examples of this are the gardens of Michael Van Valkenburgh, Terence Harkness, Warren Byrd, and Vincent Healy.

A smaller group of projects addresses the idea of garden in a less conventional way. Julie Messervy and Peter Droege, Martha Schwartz, and Pamela Burton and Katherine Spitz have all attempted to push the garden beyond its traditional boundaries in order to incorporate ideas about philosophy, art, and politics, This type of garden is less familiar than the other, but each one raises compelling questions about the possibility of using the garden to address broader issues.

The weakest aspects of this entire endeavor are those focused on the explicit professional definition of landscape architecture. By limiting the participants in the show to self-identified landscape architects with "demonstrated expertise in garden design," the organizers have trivialized their own efforts. The true agenda seems to be about defending the profession's perceived activity of designing the landscape from outside incursions by artists and architects. If the primary goal is investigation of the expressive potential of the garden and the flower, such a limitation has no legitimacy. And if the definition of professional turf is so important, the statement might have been made more eloquently by allowing it to be implicit rather than explicit.

Furthermore, the technical aspect of the profession is constantly reinforced by detailed information about plant species and maintenance details in cases where it is not relevant to the project. Steven Krog's note about plant materials might have some significance to his project, but even he doesn't seem to know what it is. Martha Schwartz's terse remark that her garden can be irrigated with a garden hose is in keeping with the minimalist character of the design, but it is just as opaque as her choice of words for the garden. This stress on professional boundaries and technical expertise has been an unfortunate aspect of the profession since Frederick Law Olmsted.

As a landscape type, the garden is clearly broad enough to accommodate investigation of a diverse range of ideas. If any proof were needed, these gardens demonstrate the increasingly important role of theoretical inquiry and conceptual design in the field of landscape architecture.

At the same time, the idea of garden may eventually become a trap. The nature of a garden as a contained space designed by or for its proprietor may become a limit to the usefulness of the type. The conventional vision of the garden is not broad enough to be applicable to the range of projects and problems the profession must face and the landscape may address. This collection of gardens suggests a number of ways of investigating the formal and philosophical structures of landscape work. This must eventually lead to transformation of the idea of the garden itself.