

# landscape

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# architecture





WHEN  
IS A GARDEN...



# ...NOT A GARDEN?

## *The Garden Festival at Grand-Métis, Québec, invites designers to go the limit—and then some.*

**By Peter Jacobs, FASLA**

The International Garden Festival at Grand-Métis, Québec, continues to test the limits of contemporary landscape practice and garden design. After only four years of operation, the festival has 33 contemporary garden exhibits that provide ample material to question whether we are invited to experience the garden, fragments of the garden, or simply the idea of the garden.

The Reford Gardens, the site of the festival, are some 600 kilometers northeast of Montreal at the mouth of the Saint Lawrence River. They comprise a substantial plant collection initiated in the early decades of the twentieth century by Elsie Reford, a collection that was recently expanded by her great-grandson, Alexander, to include an ambitious program showcasing contemporary gardens. The Garden Festival welcomes a rich mix of landscape architects, environmental designers,



A TREE TRUNK wrapped with silk flowers marks the entrance.

**O** *Hendiya*, the first garden on the plain at the entrance to the sequence of exhibits, was designed by Siham Ben Sari, a Moroccan landscape architect and interior designer. It celebrates the prickly cactus, hendiya, imported to Morocco from Mexico in the nineteenth century. Used as a thorny hedgerow or fence, its flowers and tasty fruit are all but ignored in its new homeland. This garden suggests an alternate narrative: The hendiya travels from Mexico across the swelling seas to be received within the confines of a paradise garden in a traditional Moroccan courtyard. Orange, lemon, bougainvillea, and fig, set in the four corners of the garden under the protection of a stylized tent, welcome visitors. The smells and implied tastes of the plants are reflected in the visual graphics that enclose the courtyard. As well as being intensely sensual, the project is a comment on our values and attitudes: Why should plants that require abundant water in a dry climate be given preference to a perfectly adapted, productive, and intriguing alternative?

ROBERT BARONET, LEFT; PETER JACOBS, RIGHT



graphic artists, biologists, and architects who have formed all manner of interdisciplinary teams in support of their proposals (see “The Artful Garden,” *Landscape Architecture*, December 2002).

Garden and landscape designers owe much to those who finance,

**T**hree Italian designers, Paola Cannavo, Ippolita Nicotera, and Francesca Venier of the interdisciplinary “Studio.eu” in Berlin, present a project entitled *Italian Fragment*, which celebrates the Italian passion for soccer and suggests that the contemporary garden of choice is no longer just built of axial vistas, potted plants, and sculptures as was the celebrated sixteenth-century villa. Rather, the narrative offers the prototype of the soccer pitch, represented by garden fragments that include the goal posts, corner kick markers, and center field lines. The field is anything but flat, and the undulations may suggest the rolling landscape that must be leveled and watered to maintain a viable playing surface. A corner of the garden is raised to reveal a storage area for bottled drinking water, somewhat reminiscent of a wine cellar. The project might remind a visitor of the enormous quantities of this scarce commodity that are required to support the pursuit of the familiar white-and-black ball that sits somewhat forlornly on the lawn. Even so, I witnessed a passing family, undaunted by the undulating surface, play a brief game before moving on.



organize, animate, and publicize efforts such as the Métis festival. The entrepreneurial spirit and financial risks involved in mounting this and other garden festivals are considerable, but they create opportunities for all of us to push the limits of practice beyond current boundaries. New ideas need to be tempered with time, but a lack of new ideas leads to the rapid atrophy of professional practice.

The very nature of a garden festival is such that the experimental garden exhibits have very little time in which to mature. By necessity, they appear virtually overnight—not unlike the opening of a museum exhibit—only to disappear at the end of a short summer season. Consequently, most rely on built form, color, and inert materials rather than on living plants. One wonders if they are gardens at all, or rather fragments and follies that, nonetheless, raise issues of consequence to the art of the contemporary garden. In any case, they stand in stark contrast to the historical gardens at Métis that feature a rich variety of indigenous plants as well as exotics brought in from compatible growing zones around the

world. Unlike the temporary exhibits, these gardens change with the seasons and, tended with care, flourish through the years.

### A Sequence of Gardens

Upon leaving a newly erected entrance pavilion, visitors to the festival are directed along a gently winding path that leads through the forest. Toward the end of the trail, Montreal landscape architect Claude Cormier has wrapped a 10-foot-high garland of silk flowers around a tree trunk to signal the impending entry to the Garden Festival. Emerging from the forest, the visitor explores three sites on an exposed, open plain and then seven others nestled in forest clearings loosely aligned on a cliff above the southern shore of the Saint Lawrence River.

This year, six of the projects were selected by jury, one was retained from the previous year by popular consensus (determined by polling last year's visitors), and three were drawn from a selected geographic and cultural region, a feature of each year's festival. (Previous contributions

**T**he garden *Summer Dry*, by biologist Anna Zahonero and architects Maria Goula, Claudia Illanes, Andrew Harris, and Alexandre Campello, focuses on the poetry of the harsh, dry summer landscape of Catalonia where the parched ground reflects at once a sense of desolation and of beauty. It is from the burnt soil of a summer forest fire that plant life is regenerated. The design offers a narrative of cyclical landscape change and of landscape process rather than the static formal images typically associated with contemporary gardens of the Mediterranean coast. The design invites the visitor's participation in understanding landscape processes, stressing the need to conserve and maintain them by looking beyond the burnt floor of the forest to renewed growth and shelter.



## NEW IDEAS NEED TO BE TEMPERED WITH TIME.

were gathered from France and England.) This year, the first three projects explore the dry climate of the coastal landscapes of Morocco (*O Hendiya*), Catalonia in Spain (*Summer Dry*), and Italy (*Italian Fragment*). These three countries enjoy special status with the province of Québec that allows them to access financial support from government agencies.

Quite appropriately, the Mediterranean projects have been grouped on the hot, exposed open plain where they greet the visitor as if displayed on prominently located exhibit shelves. Each is built around a narrative concerned with issues of landscape process and values, and each is highly poetic in its formal expression.

At the end of this short sequence of three projects, the tone and feeling of the festival change as the visitor discovers a magnificent vista, punctuated by a row of painted garden chairs, opening out to the Saint Lawrence River. This belvedere serves as an antechamber for the sequence of seven garden rooms that are carved in-

to the forest at right angles to the open plain. A wooded screen surrounds each of the exhibit sites; a few have views to the river beyond, but most are self-contained and in many cases self-referential. The majority of the garden projects invite the visitor to participate in the scene and to take part in the animated conversations that one hears in passing.

**B**leu de Bois by Antonio Perazzi, a Milanese landscape architect, is a neatly designed garden of square planters, grouped in the center of the forest clearing, that gradually fade toward the edges of the compact site. The theme of blue on blue, the sky reflected in still, square pools and various blue plants contained within the same simple containers, recalls the color of the blue poppy from the Himalayan Mountains that is the prize, and symbol, of the historic Métis Gardens. The entire floor of the project is covered with four tons of cherry pits, which provide a sensual experience enjoyed by most visitors who have left their shoes at the entry. The garden is resolutely modern, stressing a design discipline that is both minimalist and picturesque.

Seven garden projects are arrayed on both sides of a short forest path that stretches in front of the visitor. They represent a mixture of designs that seek to produce reactions of humor, surprise, and delight, while highlighting the more sensory aspects of the garden. All express an intellectual idea or position; however, most do so in a fragmentary way. Although many encourage visitors to participate in and experience the garden through their senses, only a few invite visitors to inhabit or to “dwell” in the garden in the sense used by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his work on the phenomenology of built space.

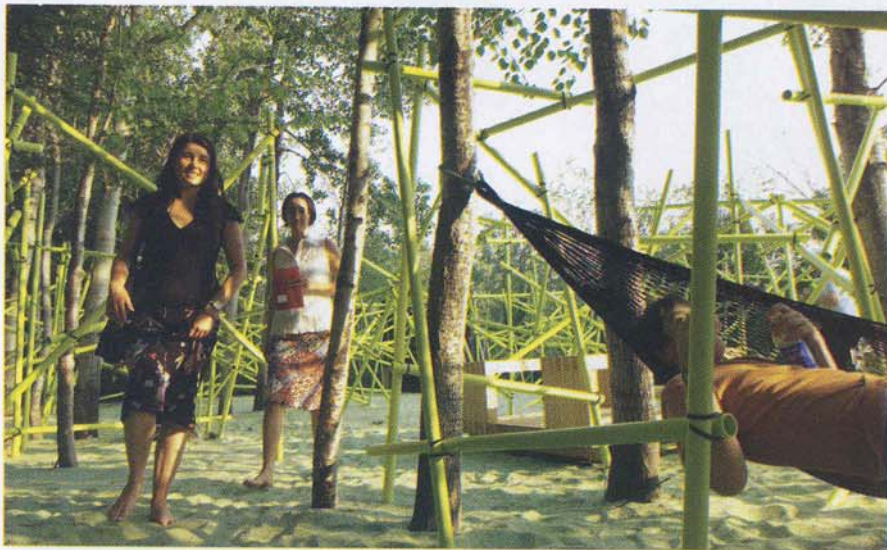




**T**he three-dimensional transparent trellis of a yellow labyrinth, *Parallax Boogie-Woogie*, weaves its mysterious path between the forest and the clearing of the garden site. The open weave of the tubular trellis dissolves the strict geometry of the plan of the labyrinth; everything is in motion, and—to continue the musical analogy suggested by the name—one has the feeling that a strongly disciplined bass hand (the plan) supports the adventurous improvisations of the treble hand (the lattice). Visitors can lie on a hammock, climb a short run of stairs to an overview of the site, or simply sit on a bench that punctuates the winding pathway. The floor consists of a delightfully soft and pliable covering of finely crushed glass that adds to the sensual pleasure of the voyage. The design was conceived by the group EKIP, comprising Thierry Beaudoin, Sinisha Bradr, Patrick Morand, and Mark Pape—all recent graduates of the architectural program of the Université de Montréal.

### Engaging the Senses

This year's set of garden projects seems to signal a return to the more sensory components of garden design. The tactile joy of moving through shifting ground covers, the sounds of metal chimes, the smells and implied tastes of the fruity plants and herbs of *O Hendiya* engage all of the visitors' senses. There is, as well, a pleasant contrast between those projects that embrace a strategy of silence, such as *Colored Reflections* and *Bleu de Bois*, and those that are chatty and outgoing, such as the *Asphalt Garden*.





Perception of gardens is a theme in *Homme-nature-jardin*, which offers an interactive dialogue among those who walk through the exhibit, the looming presence of the mounted images of anonymous faces, and the larger landscape. *Colored Reflections*

**S**tefan Tischer, who now directs the School of Landscape Architecture at the Université de Montréal, proposes *Homme-nature-jardin*, the only project that bridges both sides of the forest path with extended views to the meadow on the one hand and the river on the other. The project features tall standards that support huge pictures of anonymous faces peering down on the passing crowd. As the visitor approaches, the images seem to dissolve into the black dots of a pointillist tableau. Purposefully random paths run off in all directions, extending the idea of the garden to that of the larger landscape. In contrast to the labyrinth or the stroll garden, there is no simple garden path, no obligatory circuit to distract the visitor from the intended message. The garden is the landscape, the landscape the garden. The greens of the garden blend with those of the forest and meadow beyond to form a whole. The picture is one of people transforming territory into landscape and landscape into gardens through their presences and ours.



ROBERT BARONET, TOP AND OPPOSITE TWO; YVAN MALTAIS, BOTTOM

plays with the many ways in which the forest can be seen and, in fact, with the way that these images can be overlaid and appreciated simultaneously. Other projects suggest a narrative reading of the landscape.

This year's projects propose new interpretations of traditional

**T**he *Asphalt Garden*, by architect Michele Adrian and landscape architect Paula Meijerink of the Boston firm Se Busca, is at once a comment on the juxtaposition of the city and the countryside and on the mundane nature of the asphalt jungle transformed as a fragmentary water parterre; it suggests an amusement park somehow lost in the forest. Huge tractor tires are displayed in lieu of planters, and canted and angled wood paths seem to float somewhat precariously over the water reflected in asphalt pools. The water parterres are punctuated with cryptic messages such as "stop," which one would more likely see in the downtown core of a city. The project recalls the parking lot and tire depot of the urban wasteland, somehow transposed to a magical theme park where the reflections of the city landscape are of the adjacent forest cover. The project is full of humor; it is amusing and tweaks our imagination. In subtle ways the oblique lines of the wooden paths through the garden and the reflected forest walls tend to dissolve the hard edges of the project, leaving the visitor to ponder the ambiguous relationships of nature and culture, the city and the forest.



garden elements—the labyrinth (*Parallax Boogie-Woogie*), the porous walled enclosures (*You Are Here*), and parterres (*Bleu de Bois* and *Asphalt Garden*).



# ONE WONDERERS IF THEY ARE GARDENS AT ALL, OR RATHER FRAGMENTS AND FOLLIES THAT, NONETHELESS, RAISE ISSUES OF CONSEQUENCE TO THE ART OF THE CONTEMPORARY GARDEN.

The more successful gardens this year are those that offered more than an idea of the garden and more than a visual experience; they encourage the visitor to participate in and to mold the garden experience. The forest sites are animated by visitors who choose to remove their shoes to experience walking over the surface of gardens covered with cherry pits, crushed fine glass, wood chips, and water. Pliable and unusual ground covers invited everyone to experience the feeling of the gardens from their feet up. Shoe-carrying visitors splashed

**C**olored Reflections, designed by Montreal architect Hal Ingberg, is a minimalist triangular prism built of two sheets of glass separated by a transparent green film. The folly is set into the forest in a site where there is no obvious clearing, and the forest is allowed to maintain a sense of visual continuity. The prism, 20 feet and 6 inches on each side and approximately 10 feet tall, encloses three paper birch trees that can be reached by a hidden entrance. In fact, visitors who misread the reflected forest as they pass the site can miss the project altogether. Those who pause are treated to a fascinating display of the forest reflected against the glass walls, the interior glimpsed through a partially transparent wall, and above all, people watching people watching nature within the forest. The project illustrates the complex processes of reading and relating to nature and the subtle differences among seeing nature directly, through a partially screened and transparent filter, and as a reflection. Clearly, nature can neither be completely controlled nor organized any more than it can be seen through only one visual register. But the question remains: Is the prism in a forest a garden or a garden folly, or is it a challenge to the very idea of the garden issued to those who see themselves and nature reflected against its smooth and polished walls?





**N**atalie Tan and Marc Böhlen, architect and engineer from Ontario, explore the idea of the all-pervasive presence of technology within nature and surrounding nature in a project entitled *Unseen*. Eight stepped and parallel planting beds, all carefully labeled and organized with mathematical precision, display wild plants typical of the local ecosystem or imported plants from Europe that adapted to the region many years ago. Cameras record the pattern and rate of growth of each of these plants, much as changing traffic patterns are monitored in the city. The information is transmitted to and displayed on computer screens located in a garden shed on site. We are left with the unsettling feeling that even the familiar and unpretentious vegetable plot has been co-opted by the insatiable appetite of scientific enquiry and our need to control all aspects of the living world.

gratefully through the water parterres of the *Asphalt Garden*, seeking relief from the hot midday sun. And children playing hide and seek with their parents in the cool shade of the *Colored Reflections* animated the forest site. Likewise, a family playing soccer on the *Italian Fragment* added a dimension of joy and engagement that

was undoubtedly welcomed by the designer. The soccer ball is code, a clear invitation to engage in the garden, to experience its undulating surfaces tactilely as well as visually. **LA**

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**R**etained from last year's festival by popular demand, *You Are Here*, by Bruce Matthews and Taco Iwashima (see *LAM*, December 2002), recalls the *hortus conclusus* of the medieval garden and yet extends well beyond that tradition to question the concept of natural settings that are in fact not natural at all. At the entry, the visitor is invited to walk through a large canvas screen that portrays a meadow landscape and states, "You Are Here." The visitor then moves through hanging plastic strips that form porous sheltering walls to discover a living fragment of the meadow landscape pictured outside. The meadow is surrounded by a neat, white picket fence. On one side of the surrounding path, three chairs invite visitors to contemplate just where they are relative to the obviously transplanted garden fragment. A fourth chair, partially hidden by the plastic strips of the surrounding walls, provides an entirely different, and more personal, vantage point from which to contemplate the misplaced, displaced, or replaced meadow.



### Resources

Further information on the Garden Festival and the opportunity to submit project proposals is available at [www.refordgardens.com](http://www.refordgardens.com).

