

# SHAPING HISTORY | FAÇONNER L'HISTOIRE

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THE ROLE OF landscape architects in historic gardens is generally limited to guiding the owners or managers in restoring or modifying hardscapes and plantings. More often than not, the work is made necessary by the need to make a site accessible to the physically challenged or the elderly or to repair the advanced deterioration of structures like walls, bridges and steps. On occasion the brief extends to integrating new buildings (most often the ubiquitous "visitor centre") into the existing built landscape.

The work may be challenging, but the freedom to be creative is limited. With fewer historic landscapes than in Europe or the United States, only a handful of significant garden restoration projects in Canada carry the stamp of landscape architects.

## EIGHT YEARS... 100 DESIGNERS

At Les Jardins de Métis (also known as Reford Gardens), landscape architects have indeed filled that traditional role, creating a new visitor entrance and gardens, landscaping the site for the International Garden Festival, modifying vehicular and pedestrian accesses and designing new gardens adjacent to Estevan Lodge, the 1887 building at the centre of the property. Future work will include a new entrance to the site and redesigning highway approaches.

At Métis, however, landscape architects have also been given unique opportunities to fashion new landscapes as part of the annual International Garden Festival, held at the site every year since 2000. Over its first eight editions (the ninth edition opens on June 21, 2008), the festival has presented more than 65 gardens by over 100 designers, the majority of whom have been landscape architects with practices in Canada or abroad.

The number of gardens built over the past eight summers provides a corpus of built projects that invites analysis and reflection on the evolving profession of landscape architecture. The artistic director of the festival from 2004 to 2007, Lesley Johnstone, has done just that in her new book, *Hybrids: Reshaping the Contemporary Garden in Métis*. (See page 42.)

## PROVOKING REFLECTION

The festival also provokes reflection on the broader role of landscape architects and visual artists in a historic and public garden. As the director of Les Jardins de Métis over the past 13 years, I have been an active participant in reshaping this property, redefining its mandate and transforming its central message. As such, I have been in a privileged position to observe how landscape architects can alter and improve a historic landscape and how their work can enhance the visitor experience.

## HOW ELSIE MADE HISTORY

By some standards, a garden begun in the 1920s barely qualifies as a historic landscape. And given the fact that this landscape was fashioned by an amateur without the assistance of either an architect or a landscape architect, the appellation may

be somewhat dubious. But in the Canadian context, with the rigours of its climate and the short life span of most estates and gardens, Elsie Reford's garden is one of the few to have survived and been in continuous cultivation, and is thus classified as both a historic garden and a historic site.

Elsie Reford began her "adventure in gardening" as she called it around 1926. Recuperating from appendicitis and condemned to more genteel summer pastimes than salmon-fishing or horseback riding, she took to gardening around the fishing camp she had been given by her wealthy uncle, Lord Mount Stephen. Inspired by the gardens she had visited on frequent trips to England, she designed her garden to exploit the natural beauty of the site and its topography and views. She largely ignored design principals as only an amateur would. Her gardens were created and organized to display perennials, both native and exotic. Benefitting from the help of a network of friends and fellow gardeners, she obtained Himalayan and alpine plants that acclimatized to the cool weather and generous humidity of the Lower St. Lawrence region.

## THE GARDEN GOES PUBLIC

When Elsie's gardens were sold to the government of Québec in 1961, and opened to the public the following year, they were modified to include a system of pathways that allowed visitors to meander the site without getting lost or going back on their tracks. On occasion landscape architects were hired to design new features, as when Henry Teuscher (who had designed the Montréal Botanical Garden 25 years earlier) was invited to conceive a bog garden and pond and Luc Bérard designed a parking lot to accommodate automobiles and buses. But the scope of their work was limited as were the budgets involved.

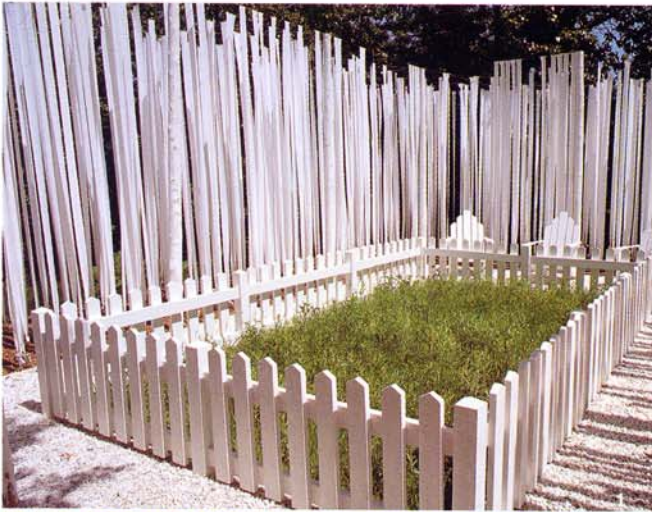
The gardens' directors did show both originality and courage by allowing the integration of works of sculpture on the grounds. Initially, their attempts to place the work of Québec sculptors in the gardens was met with hostility by visitors and staff, but a relationship developed with the Musée régional de Rimouski, then as now a leading institution in the presentation of the work of



Elsie Reford

REFORD FAMILY ARCHIVES, REFORD GARDENS

MICHEL LAVERDIÈRE



LOUISE TANGUAY



LOUISE TANGUAY



The section, "What is a Garden?," written by individual designers, provides the most rewarding read. Each of them – every single one – is worth reading. But, in the same way that buses arrive in bunches, two of the essays, together towards the middle, contain commendable reflections. In "Myth Busters," Susan Herrington considers the opportunities that gardens present for their creators and users: "Once gardens are freed from the burden of looking like idealized nature, they become open to all types of experiences and interpretations – from laughter to mourning to sheer amazement" (p. 127). And in "Practising Perception", PLANT (Christopher Pommer, Lisa Rapaport and Mary Tremain) reflects on their enduring value in a world where, in the words of John Beardsley, "time has sped up and space has collapsed": "We often speak of our projects as a means of turning up the volume or training lenses on the landscape to focus experience, to create places for scrutiny, and, ultimately, to make places to slow people down" (p. 130).

*Hybrids* contains consistently strong photographs and, apart from the white-on-black text (good to look at but tough to read), is a well produced piece of work. It is a pity that there are no biographies (only email addresses) for the contributors. But it is good to read so many well-written firsthand accounts of individual gardens, all of which form part of a venture that has made a significant contribution to landscape architecture and garden design in Canada, and been a huge gift from Canada to the entire world. Equally, it is good to see the festival listed in *Gardens Illustrated* as one of six "Top design shows 2008" globally, alongside those at Chelsea, Chaumont and Sonoma, California.

Every landscape architect should examine this clearly presented collection of images and essays by a group of talented and reflective practitioners, even if they do not buy all of Johnstone's arguments. *Hybrids* also provides valuable insight to the art of garden design to sponsors and to visitors to the festival – even if the gardens do not reflect the circumscriptions of time and place, costs and schedules, clients and users, that frame the everyday practice of landscape architecture.

1. The You are Here Garden: Christopher Bruce Matthews, Taco Iwashima 2. Core Sample: North Design Office 3. The Blue Stick Garden | Le jardin des bâtons bleus : Équipe Claude Cormier, architectes paysagistes

## HYBRIDS: RESHAPING THE CONTEMPORARY GARDEN IN MÉTIS

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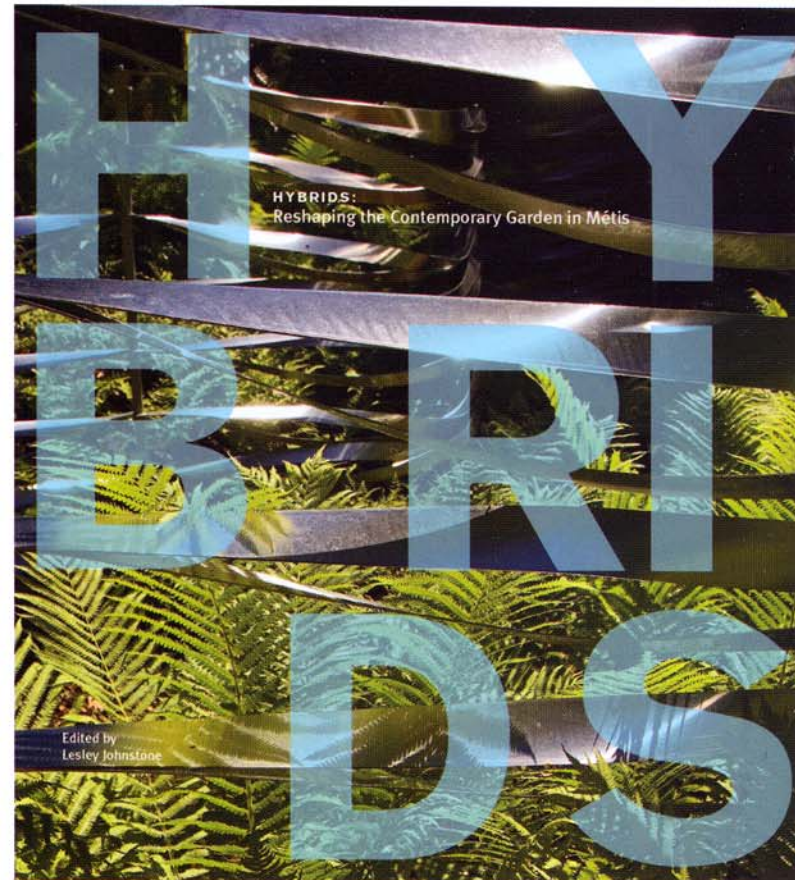
**HYBRIDS IS A RETROSPECTIVE** of the International Garden Festivals at the Jardins des Métis from their inception in 2000 to their 7th Edition in 2006. It is a book in three parts: an introductory section, "Recovering the Garden," by editor and Artistic Director of the Festival from 2004 to 2007, Lesley Johnstone (pages 7 to 92); essays from 23 individual garden designers in response to the question, "What is a Garden?" (pages 93-165); and a set of consistently strong full-colour photographs (but no plans) running through the text.

Johnstone opens under the title, "Recovering the Garden," suggesting parallels with James Corner's 1999 collection of essays, "Recovering Landscape", which were drawn in large part from the 1994 symposium, *The Recovery of Landscape*, organized by Corner and Alan Balfour at the Architectural Association of London. The word recovery suggests a malaise or, perhaps worse, territorial recapture in the way that Crusaders invaded Palestine in order to "recover" their Holy Land. One way or another, it smacks of attempted hegemony over foreign territory.

The thinly veiled suggestion is that artists have invaded garden designers' territory and helped a sick patient back to health. Thankfully, the last piece in the book, "A Preference for Facts" by Hal Ingberg, puts this recurrent issue to bed. "So," he asks, "when a landscape architect or an architect creates a 'garden' that is really not a garden, why do we feel it necessary to construct linguistic pretences? Because some prefer not to call these installations art, even if they do precisely what art does, are they nevertheless not works of art?"

Johnstone talks about gardens and landscape architecture having been conceived. . . "in relation to binary oppositions: nature/culture, art/ecology, architecture/landscape, figure/ground." If such binary thinking has been applied to gardens, Johnstone might have included more fundamental oppositions such as inside/outside, large/small, and public/private. She might also have considered the dynamics of seasonality, climate, growth and the senses – including the sense of humour. Specificities of site, circumscriptions of scale, the pragmatics of purpose and the personality of proprietors are also major contributors to the larger and longer story of the garden.

What is produced at the Festival is no more – or less – than a series of contained temporary installations for seasonal viewing by a mostly mobile, paying public – installations that inevitably run the risk of being one-liners in the epic story of gardens. They may be viewed as artworks, but it remains challenging for a client-driven, place-oriented, time-conscious design profession like landscape architecture to produce such ephemeral "installations" in a remote location. The gardens do, however, provide excellent opportunities for the application of imagination, inspiration and innovation to the creation – whether we call it art or design – of one of humankind's most enduring idylls.



Edited by Lesley Johnstone;  
Vancouver, B.C.: blueimprint, 2007;  
176 pages, \$39.95  
ISBN: 9781894965705