

What happens when you unleash an international posse of landscape architects on an idyllic microclimate in Quebec?

The thinking person's garden



MARJORIE HARRIS
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The garden, says U.S. landscape architect Chris Matthews, "is a very old art form. We lose sight of the fact that the greatest thinkers of 18th-century England, the greatest thinkers of China and Japan, designed gardens. That's not happening now. Gardens are now an add-on."

He is sitting in the middle of hundreds of plastic streamers undulating in the breeze like a liquid fence. They are weighted down with metal disks clinking softly with each movement of air. Not your usual garden, perhaps, but the International Festival of Gardens at Quebec's Jardins de Métis is not about the usual. Now in its fourth year, the festival invites architects and landscape designers from around the world to join a dialogue with the garden as their discourse.

Of all the public gardens in Canada, good as they are, none is quite so enchanting as the Jardins de Métis, also known as Reford Gardens, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence. This pocket of beauty is the fruit not just of a beneficent microclimate but the largesse of a grande dame, Elsie Reford, whose very personal garden now belongs to the province. Good fortune has brought her great-grandson, Alexander Reford, to push it in new directions.

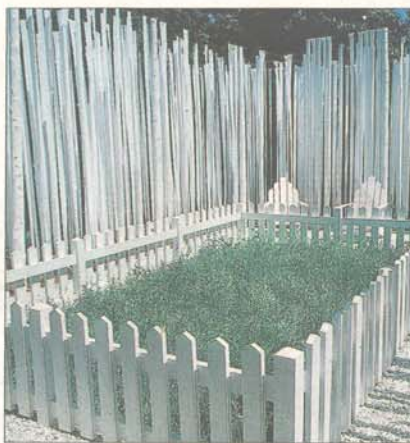
Environmental issues are a motif of the show. American landscape ar-



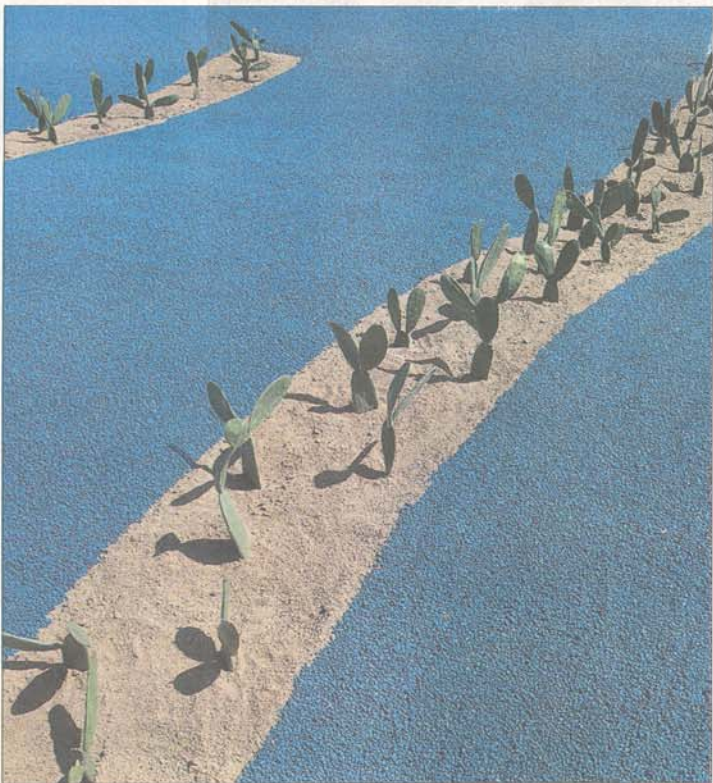
American landscape architect Paula Mejerink's garden is a highway reimagined as a reflecting pool, complete with concrete barriers and discarded tractor tires for seating. 'A pretty garden would not be enough of a challenge.'



Reflections Colorées, by Montreal architect Hal Ingberg: a dramatic green structure made of two kinds of glass that simultaneously reflects the natural area around it and reveals the garden within.



Chris Matthews' garden features plastic streamers emblazoned with the message You Are Here: 'We lose sight of the fact that the greatest thinkers of 18th-century England, the greatest thinkers of China and Japan, designed gardens.'



Shiham Ben Sari sets Mexican cactus in a wave of Moroccan blue stone. 'Water is becoming more and more scarce,' she says. 'We must find other plants that are xeric (drought-resistant). Not many landscape architects are innovators. I want to start something really new in my country.'

chitect Paula Mejerink's *The Asphalt Garden* is a highway reimagined as a reflecting pool, complete with concrete barriers and discarded tractor tires for seating. "My ambition is to be politically active, and a pretty garden would not be enough of a challenge," Mejerink says as her baby paddles happily in the water. "I recently did a talk at Harvard called Asphalt Sucks. This garden is expressive of thinking about our ordinary landscape, which we see mainly from our cars."

Italy's Antonio Perrazo uses a checkerboard grid of water and plantings of blue flowers. "I love steel and I love stones. For private gardens I use strong lines with copper or iron and pliable metal that must be touched so you understand it is metal. Without loving plants, however, you may lose the main idea of this garden."

He illustrates the landscape architect's dilemma with a story about a commission for an electric company that wanted to show its environmental awareness. He proposed leaving a section of bare earth to see what nature would do alone. But the company thought that might "pollute" the landscape with wild plants. "That's an incredible irony. Who now would pay a landscape architect to make a wood? Yet we will move a thousand-year-old olive from Sicily to Milano and pay thousands of Euros and see nothing wrong in making this an instant garden."

Hal Ingberg, a Prix de Rome-winning architect based in Montreal, sees the need for more wit in our public spaces, more use of new materials and technologies. His *Reflections Colorées*, a dramatic green structure made of two kinds of glass, simultaneously reflects the natural area around it and reveals the garden within. "These shows are useful," he says. "Landscape architects are very conservative, and garden design is about the old Brit-

ish idea of pottering around flowers. I want to create a zone between architecture and art using landscape."

Wit is certainly a play in *Parallaxe Boogie Woogie*, a variation on a traditional maze that is like a cat's cradle of acid green plastic pipes. It is set partly in the forest, partly in the open, with a base of recycled tumbled green glass. When you finally reach the hammock under the trees, you feel completely at peace. *Parallaxe Boogie Woogie* is the work of EKIP, a consortium of Montreal architects (Thierry Beaulieu, Sinisha Brdar, Patrick Morand and Marc Pape) whose major concern is the dialogue between nature and the artificiality that architects impose on it.

"We're quite conscious that this is like landscape architecture welcoming us into their playground," says Brdar. "But we don't want to get boxed in: We all live in the landscape and the same way the best architects were not architects — Corbusier, Mies, Gropius — if we look at the most innovative people working with the environment they are not necessarily professionals. It's almost like rescuing justice from lawyers."

Shiham Ben Sari, a landscape architect from Morocco, takes a prickly Mexican cactus called *Hendiya* and uses it to reinterpret the Islamic garden. She sets the cactus in a wave of Moroccan blue stone, symbolic of the journey from Mexico to here. "Water is becoming more and more scarce," she says. "We must find other plants that are xeric (drought-resistant). Not many landscape architects are innovators. I want to start something really new in my country."

The International Festival of Gardens continues until Sept. 21 (www.jardinsmetis.com or call 418.775.2222).

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