

CITYSPACE: AVANT-GARDE GARDEN FESTIVALS: LES JARDINS DE MÉTIS, LES JARDINS ÉPHÉMÈRES

Where playful, irreverent designs blossom



LISA ROCHON
LROCHON@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM
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QUEBEC CITY AND GRAND-MÉTIS, QUE. -- Summertime and the gardens are growing. They're growing up, lush and green, with all of this rain, and growing up, too, as the latest temples of design. Once considered a hallowed preserve of flowers, shrubs and trees, the garden has become a three-dimensional plaything manipulated by architects, landscape architects, graphic designers - even sound engineers. At the stunning Jardins de Métis in the Gaspésie and in the heart of Quebec City, the garden designs being presented this summer are defined by their playful irreverence and dark irony. So much for the peony.

Les Jardins de Métis, also known as the Reford Gardens, are a three-hour drive northeast along the St. Lawrence from Quebec City. Getting there requires some grit and determination, just like many of the world's most interesting places of pilgrimage. Besides a splendid 1920s heritage garden, the work of the garden's founder Elsie Reford, there are a series of contemporary gardens that allow the ideas of bright, young designers to unfurl along the edges of the lush, historic estate. This year, designers from Italy, France, Germany, the United States and Canada have created 13 wildly different contemporary gardens. The team from Florence, Italy, has created a monumental spider web with reflective balls and steel cables suspended in the forest. An American team injects some humour into what inspired Claude Monet by offering 14 hay mounds covered in lush green grass. There are some powerful interventions kept from previous years. The semi-reflective glass walls inserted into the forest by Montreal's Hal Ingberg make up a timeless piece. A brilliant homage to the lowly potato by Toronto collective Angela Iarocci and Claire Ironside with Montrealer David K. Ross is, thankfully, still there. Within a rough timber storehouse, about 1,000 potatoes have been used to make a potato battery, with the energy produced creating a delicate symphony of dots of light and beeping sound.

My vote for most compelling, understated riff on the current state of the environment goes to Rita, a Montreal trio of graphic designers. The team cut large and small pine trees from soft, cushy foam using the car-freshener pine tree as their icon of choice. In French, they're referred to as *sapins sent-bon*. The foam is stiff enough to allow visitors to pick up a tree hanging in a closet and drop it into one of 150 pre-dug spots in the garden. The spots are arranged on a grid so that once the closet is emptied and the trees are scattered across the field, it resembles a Lego maker's idea of a forest. Do you endorse reforestation or clear-cutting? That depends on whether you're hanging your foam trees in the closet, or bringing them out onto the Lego grid. It's too endearing to be pedantic, but the act of moving the trees and rearranging the composition of others lingers on.

The International Garden Festival, now in its 9th edition, attracts about 100,000 people every summer. Through publications and international lectures, the festival has attracted considerable attention as a driver of new thinking in landscape design and is closely watched by the profession for its interactive art and fresh conceptualism - strategies that can eventually inspire park design in town or city. Architects still talk about the *Blue Stick Garden* presented by Montreal landscape architect Claude Cormier in the festival's inaugural season. By painting wooden sticks blue on three sides and orange on the other, Cormier paid conceptual homage to the Jardins de Métis's Himalayan blue poppies and the mixed flowering beds of the original 1920s heritage garden, the impressive, pioneering work of Elsie Reford. Her great grandson, Alexander Reford, and Toronto members of the Reford family joined forces with members of the local community to acquire the property in 1995, and he is the force behind the contemporary festival - which he considers critical not only as a think tank but as a way to entice a younger audience, including children.

Print Edition - Section Front



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"Gardens typically attract an older visitor, a garden fanatic, people who are interested in plants and horticulture," says Reford, now the director of Les Jardins. "The temporary exhibition is a hook to bring people in. It transforms the visitor's garden experience from one that is rather contemplative to a festival which is more like *sui generis*. It's more interactive, it's designed to be energizing, and the kids can run."

Les Jardins de Métis (Métis, in this context, is a Mi'kmaq word meaning river of poplars) are now owned by Les Amis des Jardins de Métis, a non-profit group that relies on admission revenue, private donations and public funding to keep the gardens open. That's a difficult formula for any public-spirited organization. Last year, bizarrely, the Canada Council decided not to provide funding to the garden festival. Still, through a combination of patience and vision, Reford has seen to the construction over four years of a remarkable visitor centre, winner of a 2006 Governor-General's Medal in Architecture, a powerful gesture designed by Montreal architects Stéphane Pratte and Annie Lebel of Atelier in situ. The building operates primarily as an organizing device; a long, low wall of perforated aluminum frames views to the Jardins de Métis forest, then unfolds into a cedar-clad washroom, gift shop and café area before continuing its linear thrust into the forest.

About 300 kilometres south, in Quebec City, another festival of gardens has opened to the public. Though it comes without the historic legacy of France's now famous Chaumont-sur-Loire garden festival or, indeed, the Reford enterprise, les Jardins éphémères (Ephemeral Gardens) is an ambitious, multi-sensory showcase of 11 gardens sited within the Vieux Port. Quebec City architect Pierre Thibault served as project director. A juried competition was held, which selected design teams from France, Canada, Britain and the United States.

Wampum is the exhibition's toughest work by far. Produced by Quebec native designers Domingo Cisneros and Sonia Robertson, it features a series of logs lined up on the ground like graves, surrounded by a tall chain-link fence. A monumental, intricately woven belt hangs on one side of the fence. Standing inside the fence, confronted by the beauty of the weavings, there is a palpable sense of loss.

Landscape architecture firm NIP paysage of Montreal uses "clear-cut" logs to create a welcoming plaza and organically shaped pod of wood. Toronto's Plant Architect dissects the growing season of the garden in its botanical laboratory with the intent of creating a life-sized calendar. The crowd-pleaser, however, is a bright orange, almost cartoonish piece called *Plage* (Beach), an undulating wooden lounger, big enough to accommodate at least 15 seated people and a couple of circular cut-outs filled with sand. Designed by Winnipeg's spmb_projects (Eduardo Aquino and Karen Shanski with Ken Gregory), *Plage* rolls off the ground to provide shapely seating - in fact, its form was directly inspired by Le Corbusier's chaise longue, a classic of modernism designed to fit the reclining body like a glove.

From here, it's possible to meditate on the beauty of historic Quebec City, a city that has thrown a splendid party to celebrate its 400th anniversary. From the opposite, longer bench of *Plage*, visitors can look across the water to the colossal elevators on the waterfront. At night, the industrial heritage site is transformed into a projection screen for the mesmerizing video-collage about the city's history by Quebec City's legendary theatre director Robert Lepage.

The winter forces a long hibernation. Summer is when we wander out, dazed and a little bleary-eyed, to go in search of berries. At home or at Quebec's garden festivals, we push the refresh button and start to turn things over in our minds.

The 2008 International Garden Festival at Jardins de Métis, 200, route 132, Grand-Métis, Que., continues until Oct. 5 (http://www.jardinsmetis.com or 418-775-2222). Les jardins éphémères/Ephemeral Gardens event continues until Sept. 28 at Quai Saint-André in Quebec City.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher