

up the garden path

WHEN IS A GARDEN NOT A GARDEN—WHEN IT'S MOSTLY CONCRETE AND DEVOID OF PLANTS? FORGET ABOUT CREATING TECHNICALLY PERFECT LANDSCAPES, GARDENS SHOULD BE A HARMONY OF NATURE AND CULTURE, WRITES WADE GRAHAM.

NOT LONG AGO I RECEIVED AN EMAIL URGING ME TO RISE TO THE DEFENCE OF "THE MORAL RIGHTS" OF LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS, "UNDER THREAT" FROM AN UNAPPRECIATIVE PUBLIC AND THE "UNQUALIFIED" PHILISTINES WHO WIELD THE PURSE STRINGS.

A showcase example of landscape architecture at the National Museum of Australia faces the threat of replacement, just two years after its installation, by a more conventional design. In the US, groundbreaking public works in San Francisco, Denver and Washington State by Lawrence Halprin, the guru of post-war American landscape architecture, either have been or soon will be demolished. These are the tip of the iceberg.

I am a landscape designer with a lot of opinions, mostly combative. But in this case, I can't bring myself to care. Let the philistines and money men rip out a few more of the great works of my colleagues. I'm not worried that it will set us back. In fact, it might do us some good.

The truth is, as a profession we have been guilty of a lot of bad stuff: a 50-year (at minimum) plague of sterile, brutal, concrete wastelands of pointlessly patterned paving, and so-called 'parks and gardens' with trees (if there are any) jammed into tiny holes in a grid. There's rarely a flower in sight, though maybe a hulking metal sculpture of one. Spaces advertised as bringing new life to the city are instead devoid of it, attractive mainly to skateboarders and the homeless.

Once upon a time, making gardens was relatively straightforward. Gardens were fussed-up mini-renditions of an orderly, bucolic farm and countryside, executed mostly for the rich by slumming architects, out-of-work artists, women,

gay men and, at the bottom of the barrel, horticulturists. Gardens were mostly 'about' flowers and seasons, and were useful for showing off how refined the owner's taste was and how much property he controlled.

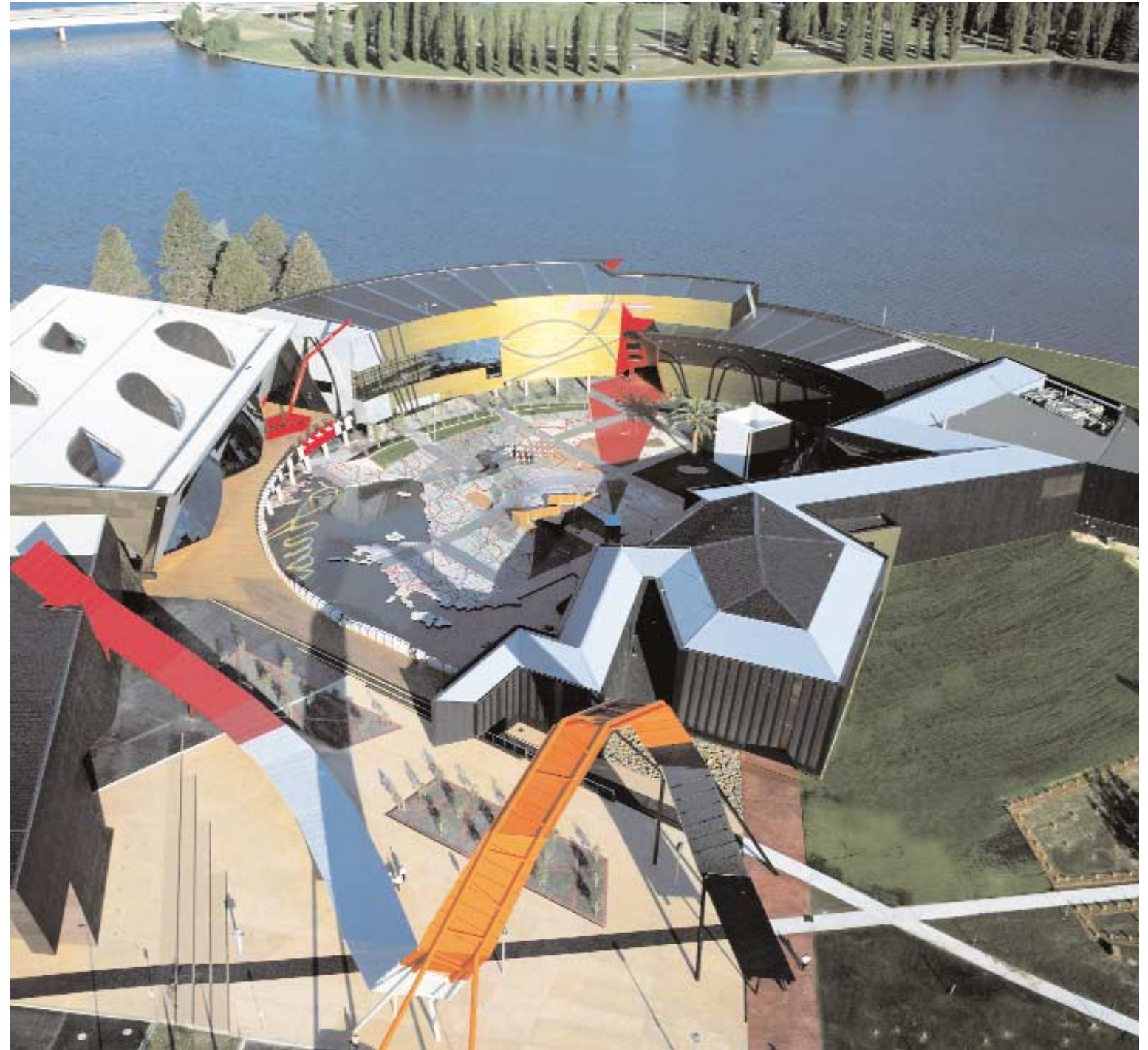
Greater ambitions approached at the close of the 19th century. Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York's Central Park, was the first to call himself a 'landscape architect', imbuing what the English quaintly called landscape gardening with a businesslike gravitas and a better fee structure. Still, he mostly planted trees and grouped rocks around lawns, his landscapes servants of the larger practice of urban (more often, suburban) design.

In the US, the technocracy movement found its way to the garden when Walter Gropius was chased out of the Bauhaus by the Nazis and took over Harvard University's Graduate School of Design in 1937. Instead of gardeners in shorts, there were men wearing starched, white, short-sleeved Oxford shirts and serious eyeglasses, their heads pregnant with Big Ideas, their fingernails free of dirt.

Having managed to convince the architecture schools that gardens were a technical discipline, to be taught at the graduate level alongside structural engineering, the new landscape men felt bidden to produce a technical, theory-driven, manly sort of work, and so the flowers and seasons got



ABOVE When artist Robert Irwin was commissioned to design the Central Garden at the Getty Centre in Los Angeles, he opted for "a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art". Costing US\$8 million and requiring a small army of workers to maintain it, the garden consists of a collection of plants chosen by Irwin for their colour and texture. The artist had to consult a nurseryman to see if his choice of flora could actually be grown together, or grown at all, in the heat of Southern California. PREVIOUS PAGE The Garden of Australian Dreams (GOAD) at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, was designed by landscape architects Room 4.1.3. GOAD has attracted much controversy and now faces the threat of replacement.



ABOVE Aerial view of the National Museum of Australia and the Garden of Australian Dreams, in Canberra, Australia's capital city. Critics of the garden say that it is abstract, obscure, tendentious and theory-driven, and accuse it of neglecting context—of sitting 'on' the land rather than being 'of' it. Others, like Professor Helen Armstrong, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Queensland University of Technology, see it as "a richly woven inter-textual analysis of Australian landscapes as a physical space" and one of the "most significant 20th century Australian landscape designs". One of GOAD's creators, Richard Weller, acknowledges the fraught enterprise of designing public spaces: "Design is the risky exercising of knowledge."

squeezed off the drafting table. Complex, innovative, geometric plans leapt from paper space to earthly space, rationally ordering the formless acreage of the universe. It was a new order—the benevolent dictatorship of the diagram.

Some of the work was creative and brilliant, and boldly advanced the Modernist cause of re-engineering city and countryside forwarded by Harvard-trained architects such as Philip Johnson, IM Pei and Paul Rudolph—Halprin's classmates. More of it wasn't, and it failed along with Urban Renewal. The legacy is mixed: lots of heroic, forceful artistry; lots of hard, alienating spaces; lots of technical mastery, but not much poetry.

Christopher Tunnard, an instructor at Harvard under Gropius, wrote: "[The landscape architect] is no longer bound by conventional imitation of picturesque nature as a long-perpetrated artistic fraud. He shakes off the academic yoke of styles, free to interpret the message of his work of art in a new and more forceful manner."

The original garden first handed down as Eden was called *pairidaeza*. In Persia, this was the king's enclosed hunting park, where nature was turned miraculously to pleasure. Paradise, then, is a walled garden, protected from the desert (and the philistines), where things are cultivated and the work is not the end but the means—to hunting, eating, contemplating, writing poetry, making love and plans. Its elements are water, trees, useful plantings and places to walk and sit.

But paradise is not nature; it is property, owned, separated from nature by walls or bounds; it is gardened, deliberate, artificial and artistic. The garden is a mixture of nature and culture in tension and dynamic interplay. You can vary the elements: more rocks, fewer plants. Or no plants: Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, for example, is a work of art, made by bulldozer, quite artificial, but inextricably embedded in land, its own (idiosyncratic) form of paradise for people who like that sort of thing. Is it a garden? Maybe.

This is why there is so much latitude in what a garden can be, and why there is presently so much confusion about what it should be. The garden historian John Dixon Hunt writes: "The subject of landscape architecture has no clear intellectual tradition of its own, either as a history, a theory, or even a practice."

The modern garden is suspended, wandering between architecture, agriculture, engineering, science and art. But at some basic level the garden is a site that reflects rituals of productivity, even if it's not explicitly about flowers and seasons. Substitute flowers while maintaining the balance of the equation, and you are still standing in a garden.

Gardens are limited, local dialogues between human pleasure and natural process. A paved square with trees in it and a fountain might be a garden. Piazza San Marco in Venice is just a plaza, an extrusion of architecture and urban design. Bomarzo, a collection of crazy Renaissance sculptures set in a ratty grove in the Roman hills, is one of the best gardens in Italy. Move the sculptures elsewhere and you have a collection of crazy sculptures, but no Bomarzo, and no garden. It's not about the objects, which are portable. It's about the arrangement of objects within the matrix which contains them and relates them to the wider context of the site, the region, and so on.

THE GARDEN AS DOCUMENT

The designers of the Garden of Australian Dreams (GOAD) at the National Museum of Australia have been accused of neglecting context, of sitting 'on' the land rather than being 'of' it—worst of all, of being theory-driven. But the charge would seem to be true. GOAD is radically abstract, obscurely metaphoric and very self-conscious, intended, in its designer's words, as "a microcosmic representation of Australian self-consciousness, based on virtuality and simulacra as opposed to mimesis of 'nature'".

Standing in GOAD is like standing inside a painted, pitching, concrete theme park without an entry ticket. It is most obviously a document, a tour de force of political cartography, a series of maps overlaid on more maps, a puzzle beyond Borges's most sadistic imaginations. Clearly intriguing but fundamentally didactic and illegible without annotation, it is *Finnegan's Wake* in courtyard form.

Anticipating these complaints, Room 4.1.3's Richard Weller, one of GOAD's creators, has written that the requirement of being subservient to context is arbitrary and a priori political. It is normally defined as a 'sense of place' and imposed on landscape work to keep it in line with fixed ideas about lost, pre-industrial worlds, or imagined pastoral idylls. It perpetuates unthinking conformity, repetitive conservatism of form—and property values.

Sense of place can be many things. With definitions come exclusions and consequences. In defining context only as the political and the social, GOAD ignores natural history, land and biological processes (the dingo fence on the map notwithstanding). The sense of place it constructs is largely an intellectual space, with the physical form completely subservient to it. "Design is the risky exercising of knowledge," writes Weller. It sounds heroic, but for all its formal daring GOAD is conventional compared to the rhetorical and political excesses of much contemporary art.

It is also vain. There is no time, no change, no evolution, nothing outside its risky exercise of knowledge. The landscape, along with any other possibility, has literally been buried under concrete. Even at Versailles, an exquisite diagram of absolute power, change and natural processes persist in tension with the static: the forest fills the horizon and surges against its bounds (and blows down in storms, as 10,000 trees did in 1997); the lawns must be mowed, the dead leaves raked, the topiaries carefully clipped to rein in their life. The absence of tension between nature and culture is why GOAD doesn't satisfy many people as a garden.

GOAD is a machine for making points, a rhetorical machine. It happens to be so big that it can be called a place, but this is purely circumstantial, a scale effect ("Honey, I shrunk the visitors!"). It would say the same things in book form held in your lap, but without the fun and the drama of walking through a giant map. In this sense, it is an idea, which is as portable as a book. But gardens, no matter how brilliant the plan, are not paper spaces. Regardless of its weaknesses as a garden, however, there is undeniable genius of communication in GOAD. Weller acknowledges this: "We recognise our limits, this is just theatre."

THE GARDEN OF RANDOM OBSESSIONS

Perched on a ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains above Los Angeles is another example of garden landscape designed for a big museum. Conceptual artist Robert Irwin's US\$8 million Central Garden for the Getty Centre, splayed out across a reconstructed 'canyon' between pieces of architect Richard Meier's grand 'campus', is manifestly a garden in the traditional sense. In essence it is a huge collection of plant species, displayed for their interest and seasonal variation, arrayed along the course of an artificial stream shaded with sycamores and studded with interesting rocks. At its terminus, the stream plunges over a fall and into a pool.

The garden is best experienced by strolling along a path. Yet for all that, it is so blind to context as to be a kiss-off, a deliberate 'screw you'. The museum and its administrative office buildings occupy a former hilltop, skinned by earthmovers, on this steep mountain front. Stone and metal gleam in the parched, drab environment; it is a violent, mutable and fragile landscape. But Irwin's plants are not from here. They are a collection of bizarre things from every conceivable climate, arranged according to his whim and painterly sense of colour and texture.

Knowing nothing about plants before the commission, he designed by cutting pictures out of plant books, gluing them into collages that made him happy, and then asking a nurseryman whether they could be grown together, or at all, at the site. Most are ill-adapted to the climate, and are water- and labour-intensive.

What I notice more than the bizarre, inspired plant combinations are the squadrons of immigrant Latino gardeners wading around in rubber boots, endlessly trimming and feeding much of what shouldn't be planted in Southern California. Irwin's sycamores are not germane to the area. His handsome rocks are not the beautiful local sandstone or volcanics, but décor imported from Northern California, Montana, South Dakota, Tennessee.

The entire garden is random in the sense that it has nothing to do with the surrounding environment and nothing to say about the climate, the landforms, the mountains or the ocean—or about why the Getty Centre is here. Nor does it have anything to say about the past, present or future of the city below, one of the most vibrant, troubled, complex and creative on earth.

As testament to his conviction, the artist even blocked off the incredible view of the city and the ocean and islands beyond with an enormous steel structure, as if to keep the visitor's attention focused squarely on the performance of the garden—that is to say, the slow ballet of all those immigrant gardeners busily trimming. It resembles the hotel lagoons of Las Vegas, with their ersatz 18th century naval battles and erupting volcanoes.

Irwin's garden is an artist's garden and, like the artist, it is obsessed—with



ABOVE The Latona Fountain at Versailles, which depicts two kinds of frogs—normal frogs, and peasants turning into frogs because they threatened the gods Diana and Apollo. Even though Versailles is an example of absolute power in landscape design, there remains a tension between nature and culture. OPPOSITE A view of the maze which forms part of Robert Irwin's Central Garden at the Getty Centre in Los Angeles. The garden deliberately avoids making any references or concessions to context, opting instead for an idiosyncratic, even exotic, selection of more than 500 plants and flowers.

Robert Irwin's Central Garden at the Getty Centre is random in the sense that it has nothing to do with the surrounding environment and nothing to say about the climate, the landforms, the mountains or the ocean—or about why the centre is here. So abstracted is it from context that it is essentially autonomous. The garden is perfect, self-contained, mute and all but portable—like a sculpture.



OPPOSITE Part of Room 4.1.3's Garden of Australian Dreams. The signature of Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, is written on one arm of a bright red 'X'. The 'X' was also often used to sign documents by Aboriginal people, who could not write. "The 'X' is a contradictory mark, at once an emblem of negation and yet on a legal document it suffices as a mark of agreement; and yet, if affirmative it is the signature of a non-identity, one who most likely could not read or write," says Richard Weller. He adds that "the 'X' is also a mark made by all Australians when they participate in the democratic process and are asked to approve or deny a proposition being put forward by a national referendum." Although the 'X' usually symbolises a 'no' vote, a denial of change, Weller adds that Australians voted 'yes' to the Australian Federation, which the National Museum of Australia commemorates. They also voted 'yes' in a referendum in 1967 when white Australians overwhelmingly agreed that indigenous Australians should be allowed to vote.

the surfaces and chromatic qualities of its materials, with their arrangement and sequence. He has called it "a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art". No doubt it is. So abstracted is it from context that it is essentially autonomous. The garden is perfect, self-contained, mute and all but portable—like a sculpture.

Ironically, Irwin himself once achieved one of the most poetic and simple works of landscape intervention of his generation, *Two Running Violet V Forms*, of 1970, where he hung a wedge of coloured chain-link fencing in a eucalyptus grove. To this day, it is probably the most effective example of landscape art yet achieved, dollar for dollar. Maybe this is a lesson in the inverse relation between budgets and inspiration when it comes to public landscape projects.

But the first, and unmatched, indignity was perpetrated by an earlier landscape designer on the project, the late Emmet Wemple, who skinned the native thicket from acres of the steep, erosion-prone hillsides and replaced it with a vast grid of nursery-grown, lollipop-straight coast live oaks kept alive with irrigation. It must have looked good to them on paper. To me, it's stupid, wasteful, insulting to the place and the public and embarrassing to my profession (but that's just a personal opinion).

THE GARDEN AS THRESHOLD.....

The Romans marked edges of their fields with termini, little statues of the god Terminus, to demarcate the wild and the domestic, claiming a buffer between the home, the farm, the fort and the wilderness. Then, as now, the garden is the connective tissue between the larger world and the architecture. It is neither object nor matrix, figure nor ground, but the interplay and relation between them.

The garden links the private with the public and the community. This is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Societies with poor gardens are poor societies, in every sense. Instead of talking about the moral rights of designers,

I ask: how well does the garden relate the house, the building, the place, with its environment, with everything and everyone else?

Theorists of landscape architecture tend to dismiss or look down on private gardens, particularly if the architecture in question is not up-to-date. I can guess their reasons: theorists and artists look down on everything bourgeois. Unlike architecture, which recognises the private residence as an enduring yet evolving challenge, the landscaperati prefer public commissions. It could be that the home owner exerts more control than the anonymous museum committee. But some of the best examples of the garden art are found on private land—understated, unconcerned with making art history, beautiful, functional and, most importantly, maintainable.

The gardens of Jacques Wirtz in Belgium are as good an example of this as any I know of. These gardens make use of traditional forms—they are house-centred, strongly axial, and heavily reliant on clipped hedges and shrubs to striate, box and straighten the surrounding forest into ranks of abstract shapes, forms, silhouettes and sight lines. The pruning shears literally make nature artificial, yet topiary's magic is that it is living architecture. Wirtz has a mastery that few artists, in any medium, ever achieve: a perfect balance of opposites, in constant motion.

Gardens have always been mediators between people and land; they have always been expressions of desire, money and power. And no garden maker is going to change the world. Landscape design is a business, even for visionaries like Room 4.1.3 and Lawrence Halprin. And businesses need clients. Thomas Church, the mid-century California designer known for cleverly adapting the uncompromising Modernist style for suburban tract homes, wrote in his book *Gardens Are for People*: "Any tendency to design for design's sake, to create a pattern within which the owners must live by rules set by the designer, is headed for frustration, if not disaster."

