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Susan Frey

Dear Norman,*

You and I haven't talked about gardens in a long time, but I thought you ought to know. You see, there are people who design gardens (you), people who would *rather* design gardens (architects), and people who care for gardens (John Q.)—and they don't talk to each other very much either. Our simple dream of a garden renaissance in America has acquired a certain monstrosity. The numbers are there (according to Gallup our #1 leisure activity), but "the movement" has been bloated by elitism and faddishness.

The good news is that landscape architects have come out of the closet to re-embrace the garden as the essence of their discipline. And they are beginning to talk among themselves. I've just come away from their first formal conversation,

an exhibition called "Transforming the American Garden." It was ragged, to be sure, yet each garden was a genuine engagement with form and meaning.

There were a couple of healthy, enigmatic kiss-offs, but they were fun to see. After all is said and done, it is really no less serious a point that the garden is as much a castle as is the home: you can and should do anything with it that you damn well please. Just ask Magic.

The exhibition seeks the spirit of the era through design inquiry. Its title is a set-up. Inquiring minds like me (and you) will be less concerned with the questions than with the answers. You will pick up on the common themes: What is the relation between form and content? (A formal preoccupation with solids reminded me of pushing food around on a

plate: some good stuff here, crucial to gardenmaking, but cold-hearted when it's the *only* food on the plate.) What is the relationship between physical context and natural process? How can design affect behavior, for personal or social healing? Who is the garden for?

When you get the catalogue, or better yet, see the show, I hope you'll spend a little extra time with the gardens that ask these questions in an eloquent matrix. Harkness, Byrd, Krog and Tegnell, Van Valkenburgh, they have conceived gardens of spirit and personal dimension. Can the renaissance be far off?

Love,
Susan

*Norman Johnson was the first editor of *Garden Design* magazine, which he and Susan Frey created in 1982.