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On the Perils of Meaning

Robert B. Riley

Before we rush out to revive the art of the garden, it might pay to inquire as to what it died from, and why. From Kent's leap over the wall? From the appropriation of the royal gardens of Paris and the great urban park movement of the last century? From garden cities and belief in the innate moral and vascular benefits of open greenery, never mind spatial or social definitions thereof? From Corbu and his vision of nature as a great pastoral sward upon which point blocks would sit like placid cows in a Repton Redbook? From Tommy Church and *Sunset* and pools and patios and barbecues and garbage cans behind redwood screens? From all of us and our assumption that technology and liberalism would make the whole world a garden?

In the end, we inverted the garden. Our *hortus conclusus* is the wilderness, wired off for the pack-framed pure of heart, playing at paradise preserved, secure from the threatening utopia we have made of the world. When control of nature, once a defiant assertion of humanity against the terror of the universe, became a pleasant pastime and then evidence of corporate irresponsibility, is it surprising the garden died?

Marc Treib called gardening the lion tamer's art. It

was, spiritually as well as practically. The persistence of the garden and its power as symbol-carrier came from the psychic act of control over that which, at the last, we have no control. It came from the establishment of a human/nature, control/submission dialectic that was the near-universal surrogate for the only dialectic even more basic: life/death. It was the power of that dialectic that made the garden such a powerful collector, an attractor of all sorts of other dialectics and symbols, cultural and individual. But when the hungry lion has become a pussy to be pampered and protected, awe has likely become amusement.

So the question is not only whether we can revive the art of the garden, that formal and floral sensitivity and technique that finally died in the 1930s, but what our gardens can mean, indeed whether they can have meaning. These twelve gardens do not give very satisfactory answers to that question.

Most of these designers come on quite confident in their ability to revive garden symbolism to provide that "something else" that gardens are said to mean. Never mind that both modern and postmodern architecture, from paneled I-beams through gilded antennas to chrome-plated

capitals, came a cropper on this issue. Take any arbitrary motif, preferably camp, weave around it enough references familiar to readers of the *New York Review of Books* or *Sporting News*, and, presto, a SYMBOL! Is it so hard to understand that for a design to succeed as a powerful symbol, it must use symbols that are commonly agreed upon and not just individually selected, symbols that connote affective meaning and not mere intellectual cleverness, symbols that are placed in a context accepted as appropriate? Is it so hard to understand how tough a job that is in a culture as centrifugal and pluralistic as ours?

At one extreme, three of these gardens (Van Valkenburgh, Harkness, Byrd) are extraordinarily complex and conscientious attempts to solve this problem, through minimally arcane references to garden history, to regional landscape evolution, to dreams. If the relationships between form and meaning, between micro and macro, between your dreams and mine, are not always clear, still the hints and clues are rich and enticing. At the other extreme (passing, somewhere in between, the vision of nuclear holocaust as late twentieth-century sublime) are two gardens that seem to be about only themselves, garden as high tech (Falcòne

and Bueno) or low tech, multisensory immersion: sensible, sensuous, and satisfying (Healy). Maybe the time when gardens can mean something else is past and not yet come again.