



Peer Reviewed

Title:

Skill, Love, Struggle, and Good Dirt [An Exhibition Debate]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 3\(3\)](#)

Author:

[Hester, Randolph T. Jr.](#)

Publication Date:

1986

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1816q1qm>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

landscape, architecture, design, garden, gallery, skill, love, dirt, randolph t. hester, jr.

Copyright Information:

All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author or original publisher for any necessary permissions. eScholarship is not the copyright owner for deposited works. Learn more at http://www.escholarship.org/help_copyright.html#reuse



eScholarship
University of California

eScholarship provides open access, scholarly publishing services to the University of California and delivers a dynamic research platform to scholars worldwide.

Randolph T. Hester, Jr.

I am supposed to argue that gallery garden design is frivolous, even immoral, because in recent debates about the direction of landscape architecture I have cast my lot *with* participatory processes, environmental justice, and land stewardship and *against* surface art for its own sake, aesthetic monopolies, and the design fiduciaries of forces that profit from oppression of people and place.

But in fairness I cannot do that because I have not actually witnessed these garden designs in the gallery. I have only seen the catalogue. Since I have long used garden catalogues, I was favorably predisposed when I received this one.

The forms speak of painful attempts to break the modernist stranglehold. The gardens wish to say something important. There is a rich experimentation that is refreshing, if often clumsy. There is original value in a sympathetic analysis of the Illinois landscape, original hue in a language of color. I like Warren Byrd's north arrow and Michael Van Valkenburgh's border of the irides. And imagine my pleasure to read that over half of the gardens resulted from participatory processes; seven of the designs were collaborative efforts.

Beautiful reproductions of presentation drawings of

landscape architecture are counterbalanced by the stunning art of Barbara Solomon. "2 Fields + 3 Houses = A Landscape" is provocative yet pleasingly engaging (its grace and elegance pulls you in before it makes you think); it is witty (the site is five 12-by-9-inch pieces of paper); and it dramatically demonstrates the tension between architectural aesthetics and landscape aesthetics (it makes one try to reconcile the work of Odilon Redon, Harold Osborne, and George Santayana all at once). This is the visual highlight of the catalogue.

The catalogue as a whole resembles a Dearborn punt, pass, and kick contest. Generally, the text is richer, more engaging than the images. In many cases, what is said about the garden doesn't jive with the images. Superficial thinking is beautifully drawn. Compelling ideas about external questions are poorly communicated. As a result, none of the psychic power intended is evoked.

In exception, Steven Krog's cemetery model does communicate. I project myself into it; going somewhere? is how I feel, precisely the emotional response he hints he wants. Seek the soul, express it beautifully, communicate it clearly. Evoking subtle and meaningful feelings and thoughts through garden design, as Krog does here, is

a valuable art. He avoids the oft-evil of superficial beauty. His garden recalls some lines by Moshe Safdie:

He who seeks truth shall find beauty
He who seeks beauty shall find vanity
He who seeks order shall find gratification
He who considers himself the servant of his fellow beings shall find the joy of self-expression
He who seeks self-expression shall fall into the pit of arrogance
Arrogance is incompatible with nature
Through nature, the nature of the universe and the nature of man, we shall seek truth
If we seek truth, we shall find beauty¹

The flexibility of Martha Schwartz's minimalist flower messages is similarly worthy garden design. The user can express herself/himself with any message, given the right season! Such a simple participatory empowerment is more therapeutic than the uncontrolled stimuli of the garden as a healing place.

Superficial pretenders, however, destroy the philosophical and political credibility of good gallery garden designs. Instead of art, they produce self-promotional imaginings and consumptive designer design, which are antithetical to both art and land stewardship. Mother nature as a covergirl makes fashionable cocktail chatter.

Environmental anomie is reinforced. The enemy of landscape art is not an uninitiated public but mediocre landscape artists.

There are other dangers in gallery landscape architecture, particularly if it intends to develop a theoretical context for landscape design, as this exhibition claims to do. It perpetuates the dominance of landscape architectural art by two-dimensional art theory, which Hepburn, Zube, and others have shown to be inappropriate. Two-dimensional art theory is wrongheaded for the landscape. It ignores the unique dimensions of landscape aesthetics: living, changing, sequential, encompassing, multisensory, forcing participation.

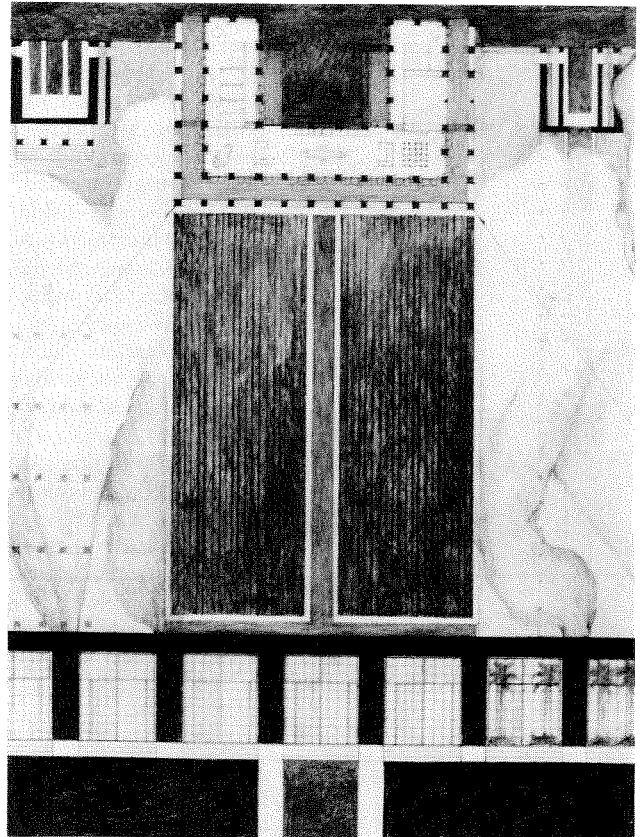
Similarly, obscure symbolism poorly translated isolates garden designers from their audience. Gardening is the most cherished and most popular pastime of American adults. As such, it poses extraordinary possibilities for designers to communicate vital messages. Why waste the opportunity with unmeaningful allegories? Does a garden deriving planted forms from Jekyll and Lutyens guarantee a better result than my Aunt Annie Helen's, whose garden derived from her Great Aunt Katherine Sue, the *Progressive Farmer*, and her need to create? No. Aunt Annie Helen's polka dot landscape represents ideas

from dozens of books and three generations of life, war, and death. That garden says something profound, yet she is still open to new ideas. She discovers emotions and creates messages in the landscape, but she knows bullshit when she sees it.

Self-discovery through visual metaphors doesn't require a garden designer who draws in tongues. All one needs is a pair of eyes, a landscape, and a hoe. Some people in the rural area where my Aunt Annie Helen lives even appreciate the beauty of the landscape and its complex symbolism without a college degree.

There is a sign over the inside of my aunt's garden gate. It says a garden is nothing without skill, love, struggle, and good dirt. The words love and struggle are crudely handwritten; skill and good dirt are letraset-quality painted. Understanding and appreciative, almost every departing neighbor nods to the sign.

¹From the book *Form and Purpose: Is the Emperor Naked?* from the International Design Education Foundations, Aspen, CO, 1980, page 139.



Partial Plan

Barbara Stauffacher Solomon