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This redesigned landscape allows visitors to make the transition from a rural Quebec highway to a series of intimate landscapes.

Reford Gardens, Grand-Métis, Quebec

VLAN Paysages and Atelier in Situ

Screens of Delight

by Elsa Lam

An excursion to the celebrated Reford Gardens is undeniably a major undertaking. Situated on the banks of the lower St. Lawrence River, the historic site was formed on a country estate six hours from Montreal. Nonetheless, a large audience routinely braves the journey to reflect on the horticultural legacy of Elsie Reford.

While the gardens regularly receive attention, landscape architects VLAN Paysages and architects Atelier in Situ are taking the drive seriously. Currently in the process of being constructed, their master plan for the site, dubbed "90-0 km/h" creates a perceptual transition that eases visitors down from swift highway speeds.

The new master plan was drawn five summers ago, as part of a planned site expansion from the historic gardens built by Madame Reford on her summer property in Grand-Métis between 1926 and 1979. A week-long charrette produced the winning project, authored by the collaborative team of landscape architects Julie St-Arnault and Micheline Clouard of VLAN Paysages and architects Stéphane Pratte and Annie Lebel of Atelier in Situ. The team laid plans for a new area to house a contemporary garden festival and redesigned the entrance zone south of the historic gardens.

In the case of most tourist sites, a prosaic entrance provides a parking lot prologue to the main attraction. Here, landscape and architectural components have been used integrally in a clever approach that creates the necessary conditions for a car-weary audience to properly appreciate the gardens.

The entrance is divided into three landscape filters, or screens, in zones defined by historic and current access roads. At the southern edge of the park, the Anamorphic screen buffers between Route 132 and the gardens by building up existing tree plantings to create a dense forest. The highway to Grand-Métis brings the traveller on a lengthy journey past vast expanses of field and countryside. Still moving at high speeds, motorists register a blurred view of this forested area—an anamorphic image that somewhat nondescriptly announces the presence of the gardens beyond.

Turning to follow the path of a restored former regional road, the visitor drives alongside the second filter. Currently under construction, the Deceleration screen will use lines of trees in a rhythm of planted areas, creating a visual staccato effect to measure the speed of visitors as they slow towards the parking area.

As visitors take foot outside their vehicles, they are met by a multi-layered Interpretation screen. The first of a series of linear rose gardens was planted in the parking lot this year, greeting tourists with fragrant slips of flora. Sensitive to locality, the selected roses are a collection of hardy varieties developed for Quebec's harsh climate by Agriculture Canada.

These linear gardens lead to the promenade, a pathway that follows the historical axis of the Kingsway from which one could access the gardens in Madame Reford's time. Engaging visitors more intimately, an herbal garden occupies the centre of the promenade: parsley, basil, sage, thyme, and switchgrass are collected in 300-foot-long bands, each length composed of the same species sourced from different locations. The resulting game of subtly varying textures and scents invites

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visitors to touch, pluck and taste.

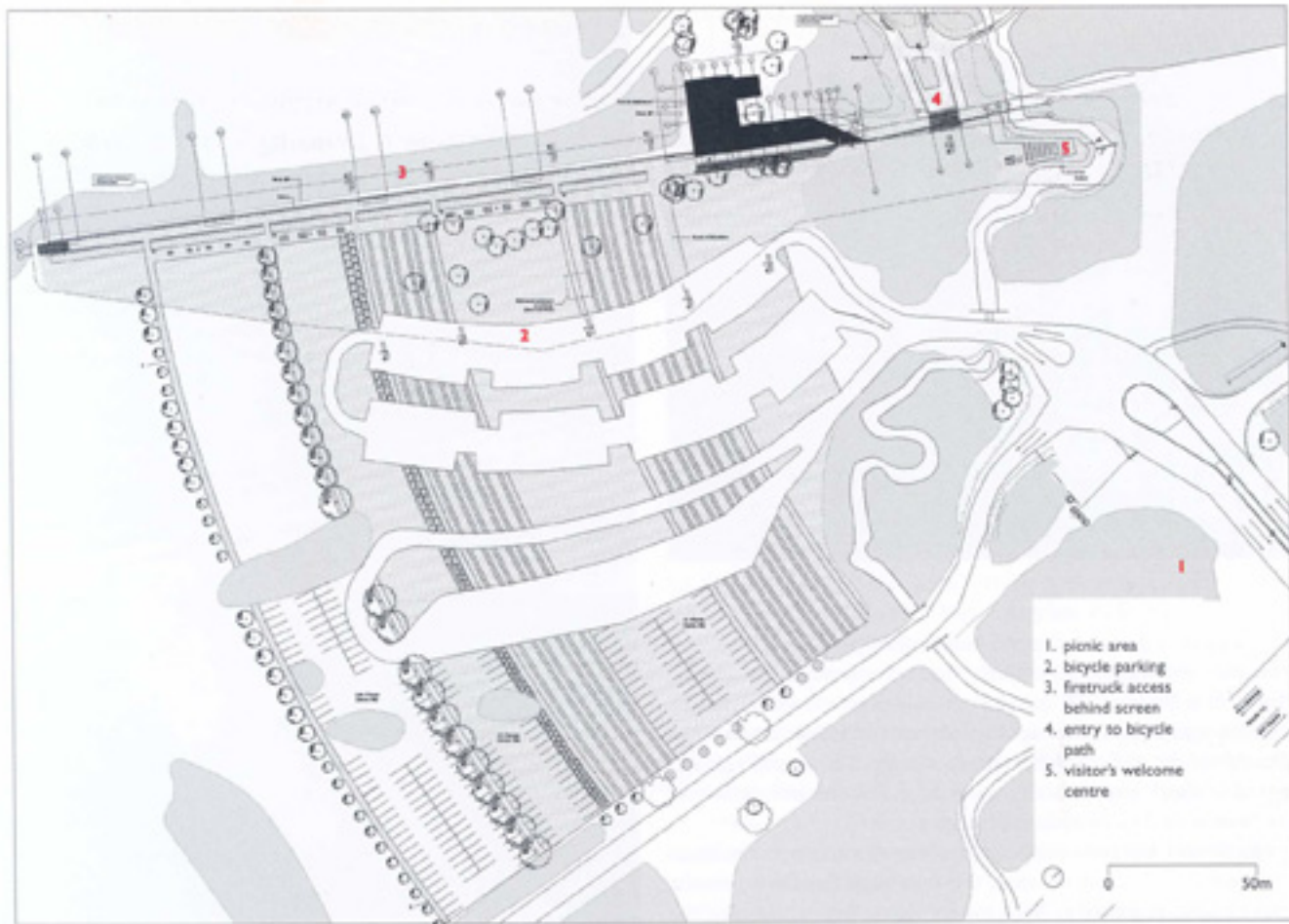
Opposite, a perforated metal wall screens the main garden and integrates the interpretation posts. Panels designed by the graphic design firm Uniform will group large-scale photos from the Reford archives with smaller contemporary photos of the same areas, taken throughout the year to exhibit seasonal change. The assemblages will provide a visual "you are here"—a colourful, text-free introduction to the broader landscapes of the Métis region.

To the east, the promenade terminates in a lookout over the Métis river valley. To the west, the metal wall transforms into the façade of a visitor's pavilion opened in 2003, and becomes a fluid extension of the screen.

The pavilion takes on an important role as an architectural transition to the gardens. Upon approach, a line of vision leads through the building into the landscape beyond. The structure itself sits gently within its landscape: wrapping through a natural clearing, and hovering on pilotis over a portion of the production gardens of the estate. Generous doors open completely to a large terrace at the building's heart, immersing visitors in the clearing.

Left: an aerial view illustrating the shift from highway to park. Clockwise from top left: a rendering of the axis; a detail of the long perforated screen; views along the major landscape spine; a centrally pivoted gate door serves to welcome visitors to the gardens.





In the building's finer details, Atelier in Situ has continued to softly mark the transition between interior and exterior. An elegant construction detail turns the roof's edge to form the ceiling. At the edge of the washrooms, the ceiling is drawn slightly back to create a wedge of exterior space.

Completing this gentle introduction sequence, the final threshold into the gardens occurs almost surreptitiously—the metal

screen folds over the pathway, creating a sheltered location for ticketing. Visitors turn towards the St. Lawrence after passing through, in a contemporary reinterpretation of the action of entering the estate gates.

While the project is still seasons from maturation, the completed pavilion exemplifies a new, sensitive approach to the Reford Gardens. Landscape, architecture and graphics are collaborating in an endeavour free of

flamboyant gestures and tectonic feats. Rather, these disciplines are taking on a supportive role, framing a physical and temporal approach to the site. In doing so, design may succeed in bringing visitors to a place where time and speed are of no concern. **ca**

Elsa Law is an architectural graduate of McGill University and is currently pursuing a doctorate at Columbia University in New York.



Left: a view of the pavilion for visitors as they enter the gardens.

Client: Reford Gardens
Architect Team: Annie Label, Solphane Pratte, Geneviève L'Heureux, Marc-André Plasse
Landscape Architect Team: Micheline Clouard, Julie St-Arnaud, Ted Landrum
Graphic Design: Patrick Pellerin, Stéphanie Cliché
Structural: Nicolet Chartrand Knoll
Mechanical/Electrical: Groupe BPR
Contractor: Lauréat Pépin Inc.
Area: not available
Budget: not available
Completion: August 2003