

Seeds OF Future GARDENS?

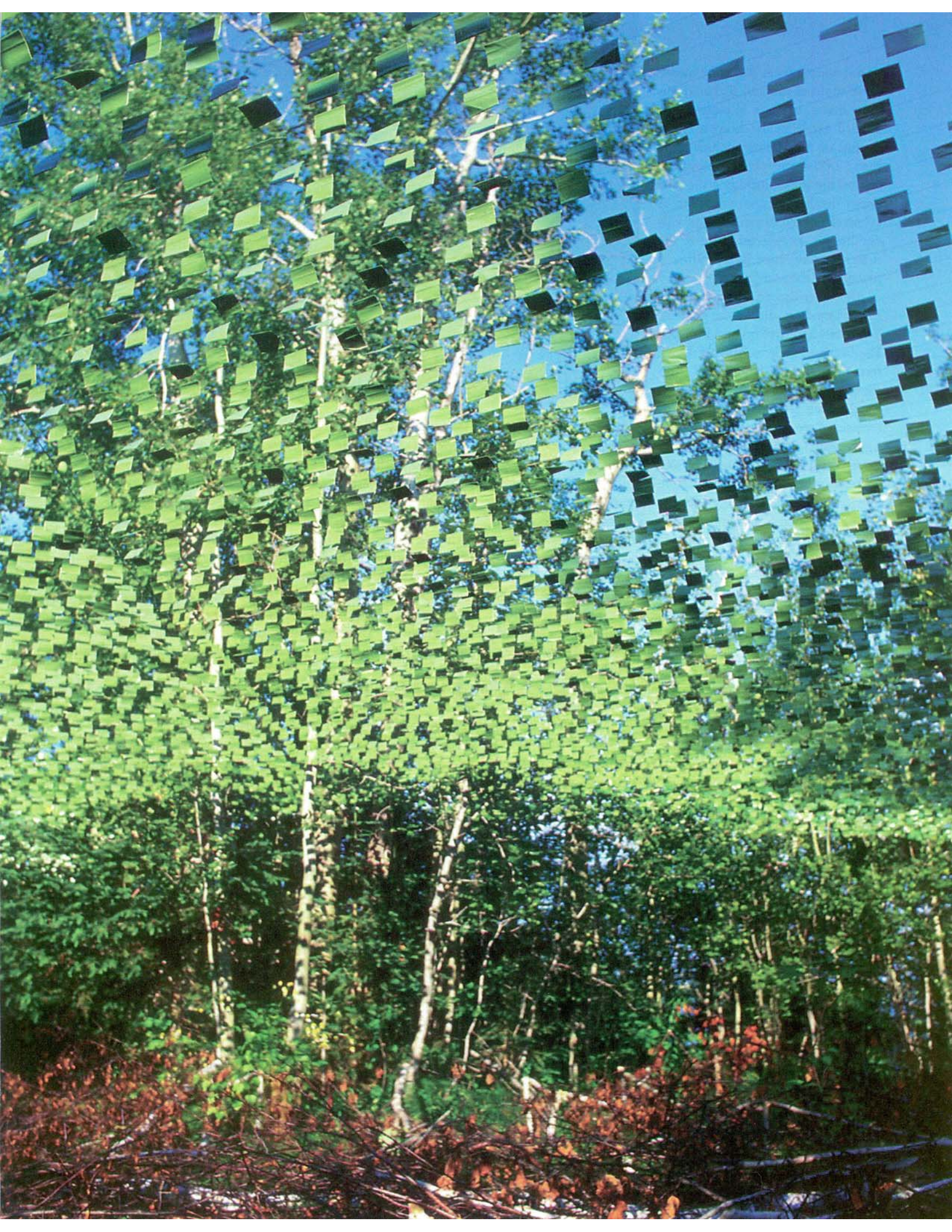
The first contemporary garden festival in North America aims to create “a living laboratory for the expression of ideas on the art of landscape.” Is it succeeding?

BY PETER JACOBS, FASLA

What is the essence of the contemporary garden, and how does it reflect our idea of nature and our sense of culture? To what extent do the garden models of the past inform those of the present, and how will these serve as models for the future? The International Garden Festival at Grand-Métis presents a venue for experimentation and a window on the avant-garde. It challenges both designers and visitors to explore the forms, programs, and materials that define garden design with emphasis on those aspects that distinguish it from other art forms.

Grand-Métis lies on the southern shore of the majestic St. Lawrence River, a six-and-a-half-hour drive northeast of Montréal. At a point where the river is 40 miles wide and tides vary as much as 16 to 20 feet, the overpowering presence of river, sky, forest, and field is palpable. It was here, in the 1920s, that Elsie Reford initiated her unique garden in a setting that few thought possible. Poor topsoil over a clay base and a winter climate with temperatures that plunge to 20 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit) bode poorly for temperate plants. Yet deep snow cover from November to May provides a protective blanket, and the plentiful rain and wind-blown saltwater from the river complement the short growing

THE FESTIVAL provides garden designers the opportunity to explore the idea of the contemporary garden, whether as shelves lined with pinecones (top left) or wheelbarrows laden with kitchen produce (bottom left). Opposite, the bent and uprooted forest floor shimmers in the shadows cast by a “lawn” of adhesive strips suspended in the forest clearing.

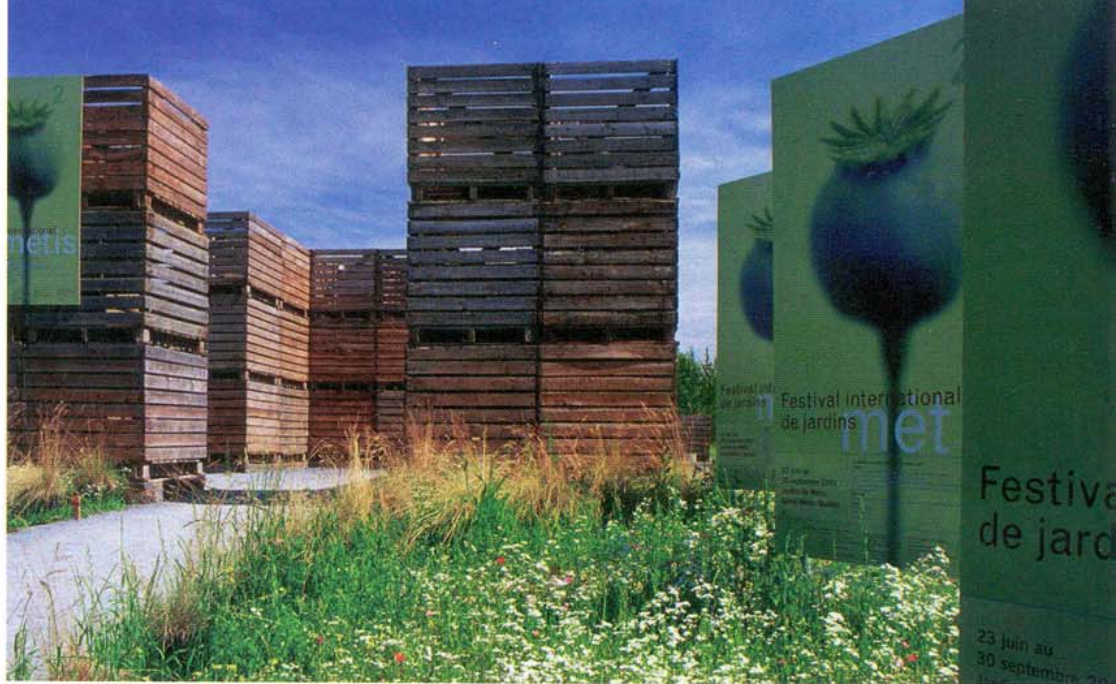


season where plants, fueled by the intense summer sun and sheltered microclimates, explode in bloom. The Reford gardens, also known as Les Jardins de Métis, now include more than 3,000 species and varieties from around the world, including the blue poppy that has become its emblem. A conservatory for threatened and vulnerable plants representative of the lower St. Lawrence River valley is planned for the near future.

Alexander Reford, a historian and Elsie's grandson, directs the gardens. Two years ago, Reford and Philippe Poullaouec-Gonidec cofounded the International Garden Festival and, with the director, Denis Lemieux, launched an ambitious program to create an international rendezvous of experimental garden and landscape design, research, and teaching. For the first year of the festival, all nine garden designers were invited. For 2001 and subsequent festivals, an open competition to explore the nature of the contemporary garden forms the centerpiece of the selection process. A jury of three members reviews submissions from landscape architects, architects, and artists working in the United States, England, France, and Canada, who are asked to submit a critical text on the nature of the contemporary garden along with a portfolio of their work. On the basis of these submissions, teams are selected to develop garden proposals limited to a design and construction cost of \$25,000 Can. (\$16,500 U.S.), paid from the festival budget. The design teams selected are assigned their sites by lot, and installations are intended to last for one summer. Exceptionally, Not in My Backyard, a garden design that elicited a good deal of public interest in the first competition, was held over for a second year.

THE GARDENS

Even the site plan for the experimental gardens was the subject of a competition. Julie St. Arnaud and Micheline Clouard of Vlan



Associates, a young firm of landscape architects from Montréal, developed the winning submission in collaboration with the architectural studio In Situ. The new experimental sites are reached by traversing a short stretch of forest adjacent to the historic gardens. Piled wooden crates serve as the gateway to an open plane where the first two experimental gardens are located. These, in turn, lead to a belvedere overlooking the river and then to a group of eight clearings in the forest, strung together along a path that terminates with another splendid view of the littoral and river landscape. The gateway to the gardens establishes a design vocabulary that quickly distinguishes it from the Victorian flower beds and border plantings associated with the adjacent historic gardens. While the site is in many respects picturesque, the gar-

While the site is pictur

dens are not. All convey a concern for the places where we live and the landscapes we fashion. A number use artificial products and by-products of our industrial society to stress the precarious state of nature. Some are "in your face"; others are seductive, gentle, and even humorous. They offer commentaries on our lifestyles and the way we feel and know the landscape. A number stress the sensual qualities of the garden, others the process of growth, change, and decay. Above all, the projects vary from forest to field, from parterre to plastic, confronting and challenging the very idea of the garden in our society.

The nine gardens presented at this year's International Garden Festival are described in the order the visitor is likely to encounter



THE ENTRY PLAZA, (above) a collaborative design of Vlan Associates and the team In Situ, provides a contemporary ambiance that signals the nature of the gardens that follow. The garden proposed by Dominique Caire (at left) portrays a romantic vision of the Métis landscape.

them. **A Week in the Vegetable Garden**, the first of two gardens sited on the open plateau overlooking the river, stresses the relationship of the garden and the kitchen. Michel Boulcourt, a French landscape architect who teaches and practices in the town of Blois, France, divides his site into six compartments, each devoted to the daily menu of the week, the seventh day being a holiday. Individual plots are organized with respect to a menu affixed to a slate on the birch pickets used to separate the garden plots. The vegetables required for the daily menu, displayed in well-composed planting beds, serve as the background for three colored wheelbarrows ready for use in the kitchen. Thursday, for instance, is yellow. String beans, zucchini, squash, celery, corn, and sunflowers will serve as the ingredients for a supper suggested by Guy Savoy, a restaurateur of note in Paris. The sensual relation of sight, smell, and taste is orchestrated in a simple straightforward manner. One quickly grasps the French love affair of the potager and the palette.

The Colors of the Time, a garden designed by French landscape architect Dominique Caire, is the only flower garden of the set. In an attempt to draw on the perceived culture and landscape components of Métis, a pastiche of fishing nets, lobster traps, and baskets divides the garden plot into two rather disconnected parts. The project is sensed as part of the picturesque tradition, a close cousin to the adjacent historical gardens. There is a delicate and well-controlled use of plant material, and the colors are bright and appealing, but the garden is neither experimental nor provocative. At the edge of the garden a wide lookout, furnished with garden chairs, frames the river landscape and leads to the remaining gardens set within seven forest sites.

As visitors leave the open plateau for the forest path, they are confronted by the work of a collective, BGL, that consists of three artists from Québec—Jasmin Bilodeau, Sebastien Giguere, and Nicolas



changing strata of even the most familiar of our landscape transformations. There is nothing “pretty” about this garden; the importance of formal composition bows to the content and meaning of the forest landscape and its continued ability to support the sensory experiences that fuel our landscape memories.

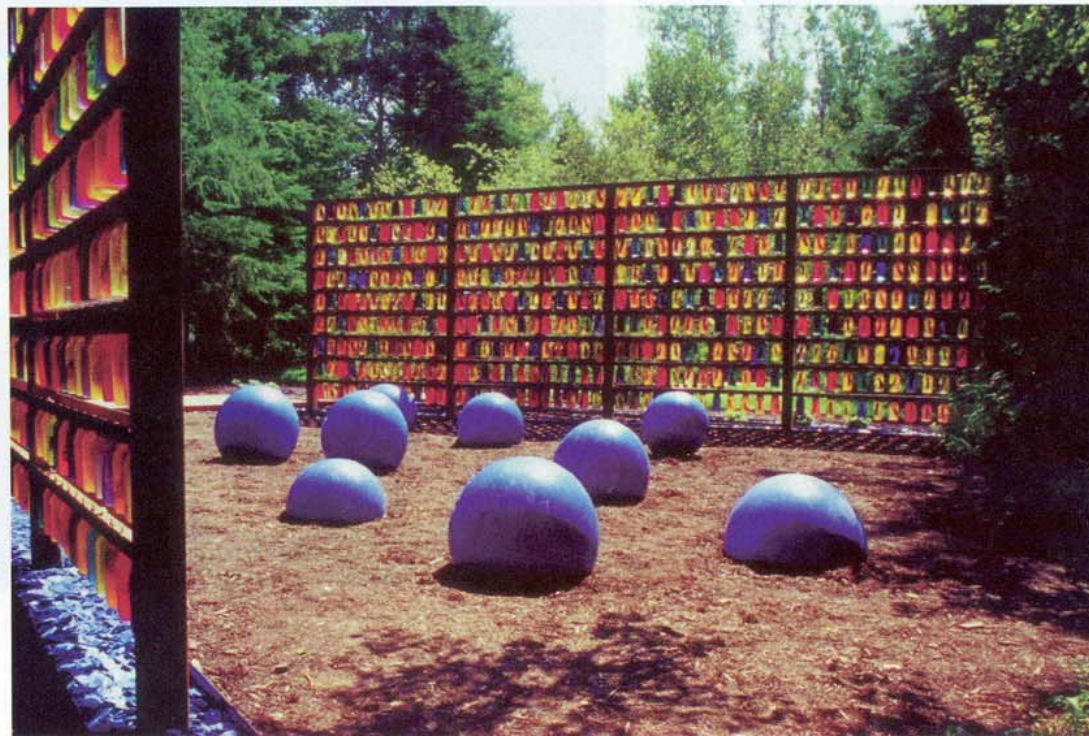
A team of young architects from Québec that includes Pierre Thibault, in collaboration with Katherine McKinnon and Vadim Siegal, proposes a garden setting that purports to interpret the littoral landscape of the St. Lawrence River.

Garden Territory features a long, thin canal, bounded by precise steel edging that runs across both sides of the forest

esque, the gardens are not.

Laverdiere. Their project, **The Beaten Path**, is a raw and powerful comment on human and natural transformation of landscape. Set in a forest clearing, a raised wooden terrace or balcony overlooks a suspended synthetic lawn built of plastic ribbons strung on wires that fill the entire space of the clearing. Beneath, the visitor is invited to walk a beaten dirt path through the cut timber, bent twigs, and debris that preceded the implied construction of a country chalet or suburban villa. Amidst the destructive scene below the plastic lawn, new saplings and forest shoots suggest the inevitable resurgence of nature. The suspended lawn is used as a metaphor that stresses the hidden and

ASTROTURF HIGHWAYS cut through the suburban lawns of the Western Plains, top, while giant blueberries serve as delightful play sculptures in the In Vitro garden (right) designed by NIP Paysage.





den gate, the visitor is confronted with a series of instruments used to measure the temperature, winds, pressure, and altitude on the site. The scientific certainty of this data is confronted by a floating path of metal snowshoes that invite the visitor to reach a concrete lily pad in the center of the forest floor. On arrival the concrete turns out to be springy and soft, challenging our qualitative sense of environment. The path continues to an overlook equipped with a telescope that extends the experience of the garden to the river landscape beyond. This is the only garden that is not defined by forest or other walls, that attempts to leave the site as it is found. In the spirit of earlier research by Lassus, it is an open composition that

clearing that straddles the central festival path. A collection of driftwood, some lichen, and other signs of the littoral landscape float in a sea of wheat bordering the canal. The composition is terminated at one end by the forest and at the other by a stone grotto. The garden is beautifully composed, although its message is somewhat compromised by the goldfish that swim in the canal—a poor substitute for the majestic whales that call the river home. Landscape metaphors lend themselves to many different readings. In this case, the strong architectural lines of the garden set within a sea of volunteer growth might recall, as well, the industrial wastelands of Montréal's Lachine Canal or similar urban shorelines.

Under the Lawn, a Garden is the work of three landscape architects from Montréal. Sophie Beaudoin, Marie-Eve Cardinal, and Michele Gauthier recall the theme of landscape transformation suggested earlier by JBL. Grass lawns are peeled away from a series of mounds displayed as cut forms oriented at various angles throughout the garden. The landscape exposed by the archaeological dig reveals the products and by-products of contemporary life, where Formica chips, compact discs, and highway reflectors are used to suggest the emergence of a new palette of garden plants. Repetitive forms and insistent patterns and colors suggest a formal preoccupation that tends to overpower the garden idea.

Being There is a project by Bernard Lassus, a well-known French landscape architect, that explores the ways in which we know the landscape. At the gar-

den gate, the visitor is confronted with a series of instruments used to measure the temperature, winds, pressure, and altitude on the site. The scientific certainty of this data is confronted by a floating path of metal snowshoes that invite the visitor to reach a concrete lily pad in the center of the forest floor. On arrival the concrete turns out to be springy and soft, challenging our qualitative sense of environment. The path continues to an overlook equipped with a telescope that extends the experience of the garden to the river landscape beyond. This is the only garden that is not defined by forest or other walls, that attempts to leave the site as it is found. In the spirit of earlier research by Lassus, it is an open composition that

leaves room for the visitor to ponder what he feels as much as what he thinks he feels. The architectural firm of Richard Davignon, Laura Plosz, and Troy Smith is based in Calgary, at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. **Narcissist Narcosis** expresses a concern with the repetitive and uniform landscape of suburbia, as illustrated by the idea of the lawn. Parallel strips of undulating and planted forms, the width of a lawn mower, suggest the fenced-off strips of the

Ambiguous boundaries remain between

private suburban prairie gardens, each planted according to a program that ignores its neighbors at the expense of the whole. One strip grows wild, perhaps hinting that the energy invested in the others may be sadly misplaced. Only the purple/blue Astroturf path through the grass strips seems out of keeping with the disciplined grid of the prairie landscape.

At the next garden, **In Vitro**, a young team of landscape architects from Québec invites the visitor to enter on a plywood path that cuts diagonally across the forest clearing. Large metal



CAN FLOWERS of compact discs (top) announce the arrival of spring? Organized as border plantings, the industrial by-products of urban life are displayed as the flowers of the contemporary garden, right.



racks are set at various angles to the path and one actually blocks it, forcing the visitor to step off and then back on in an attempt to halt a rapid reading of the project. In the first set of racks, bottles used to conserve fruit, suspended by their caps, contain row upon row of spruce saplings. Farther along, the jars are filled with

and recycled materials can be rendered useful, and even decorative, if handled in innovative ways. Discarded metal fencing is rolled up and used in lieu of the garden bench, found objects are displayed in wash-tubs, and glass pellets animate a series of parterres at the garden entry. Waste materials become a resource particularly well suited to the urban backyard, a garden that suggests that the imagination, not the pocket-book, is the only real limitation to the garden setting. The balance of form and content reinforces the message intended by the young team of designers, who have called their firm DRAR—*de Rêve à Réalité*, From Dream to Reality.

RECEPTION AND PERCEPTION

The question posed by the international festival competition challenges participants to help define the nature of the contemporary garden, a challenge that remains largely unanswered. As one would expect of the avant-garde, the majority of the gardens comment on the culture of which they are a part. They expand our sense of the

garden, yet remain very much a part of its tradition. The forest clearings serve as the *hortus*

garden design and artistic installation.

cones suspended in multicolored liquids. Texts and images that represent the collective memory and sense of the forest are pasted inside some of the jars, providing a reading wall for those who are inclined to browse. The forest is a critical and recurring theme in the consciousness of Québec. The garden designed by Mathieu Casavant, France Cormier, Josée Labelle, Michel Langevin, and Mélanie Mignault suggests different lines of inquiry with respect to its past and its future. Can the forest continue to serve as the storehouse of our myths and legends? Or is it simply another of nature's commodities to be consumed as efficiently and effectively as possible? And will the wealth of genetic material found in the forest support the growth of giant blueberries found in the garden, or more helpful products that might ensure the continued health of those that depend on it?

Not in My Backyard is the last of the gardens to be visited, and the only one held over from last year. Designed by Patricia Lussier and Anna Radice, the garden illustrates how mundane

conclusus, the traditional fence or enclosure that is the *sine qua non* of the garden in the western tradition. Where the forest is absent, birch pickets or transparent thicket screens provide enclosure. Perhaps *Being There*, by Bernard Lassus, attempts most clearly to erase, rather than to leap, the garden fence. The science of measurement and the art of feeling are used to question the limits of garden, landscape, and environment.

The overall impact of the set of experimental gardens, particularly as they contrast with and complement the historical gardens, was stimulating, providing a number of (Continued on Page 84)

THE STONE SHELTER recalls native settlement along the St. Lawrence River shoreline, top. The history and development of the littoral landscape of the Saint Lawrence River serve as the genesis of the garden proposed by Pierre Thibault, right.



Seeds of Future Gardens

(Continued from Page 65) different visions of future garden paths. The festival itself serves to stimulate the emergence of new ideas in a society that has a seemingly insatiable appetite for gardens and gardening. It provides an important opportunity for young designers to test and to share their visions in the emerging marketplace of garden form and meaning. Many of them are recent graduates or young professors of the School of Landscape Architecture of the Université de Montréal.

The relaxed atmosphere of the lower St. Lawrence and the beauty of the Métis landscape are such that visitors move rather slowly through each of the garden settings, comments are freely exchanged, and the opinions overheard are generally favorable. These can contrast, somewhat humorously, with the more serious and lengthy explanations offered by the guides who lead informal tours through the site. About 100,000 people have viewed the gardens this year, most on only one occasion and for an hour or less; the impact of the garden is sensed rather

quickly or not at all. Ambiguous boundaries remain between garden design and artistic installation. A contemporary code of meaning and vocabulary of garden form has not yet achieved consensus and is unlikely to do so for some time. Thus, the experimental gardens that remain open to interpretation, that invite the visitor to participate in the garden project, and that encourage the exploration of memory and of dreams continue to capture the interest of professional and amateur alike. These dimensions are implied most strongly by The Beaten Path, where the process of landscape transformation is presented with brutal honesty and concern. In Vitro offers a number of possible interpretations of our forests, their use and reuse, our attitudes toward them, and the ways in which they are managed. All projects address the garden as an agent of change as much as a mirror of culture. Many do so with sensitivity and concern, inspired by the image and reality of the river, littoral, forest, and fields of the landscapes of Métis. **LA**

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RESOURCES

Beringer, Hubert. *Garden Rooms: International Garden Festival / Reford Gardens*. First edition, Summer 2000. Published by the Jardins de Métis and Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. A well-designed book that provides an overview of the first set of experimental gardens.

Reford, Alexander; photographs by Louise Tanguay. *Reford Gardens*. One of a series of Guides to the Gardens of Québec. The guidebook provides an interesting overview of the history of the site and of the Reford family, as well as detailing its various historic gardens. Editions Fides published the book in 2001.

Further information is accessible on the web at www.refordgardens.com and festival@jardinsmetis.com.