

TRANSFORMING THE AMERICAN GARDEN: LOOKING BACK AT “12 NEW LANDSCAPE DESIGNS”

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1 **ABSTRACT**

In the mid-1980s, an emphasis on lightness, authenticity, and artful presentation defined new movements across a broad range of subjects from gastronomy to physics. In the field of landscape architecture, a similar attention to playfulness, truth (the search for a philosophical base), and representation characterized many works of the era, and was evident in a key exhibition of “new” landscape design held at the time. Through extensive literature review the author examines the historical and critical context of this exhibition to assess what trends influenced landscape architects at that time, and what paradigms evolved in the intervening decades to “transform” American garden design. She finds a renewed valuation by landscape architects of the garden as a source of creative expression and ground for theoretical discourse, and concludes that the exhibition served as a significant marker of an emerging postmodern aesthetic in landscape architecture.

1.1 **Keywords**

Landscape Exhibitions, American Gardens, Conceptual Design, Landscape Architecture, Postmodernism

2 INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, the landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh invited a select group of early- to mid-career American landscape architects with practices and/or research concerned with gardens, to propose hypothetical landscapes for an exhibition intended to illuminate the state of contemporary design practice. Titled *Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs*, the exhibit was first displayed at the Architectural League in New York in spring of 1986; it traveled thereafter to the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and other venues nationwide. Funded in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Graham Foundation, the exhibition and its accompanying catalog received widespread attention from the design community, both within and beyond landscape architecture. Reviews appeared in the periodicals *Landscape Architecture*, *Artforum*, *House and Garden*, and the *Boston Globe*, as well as in publications local to each venue. The exhibition catalog was reproduced in the environmental design journal *Places*, accompanied by commentaries from prominent landscape scholars and critics. Looking back at this exhibition (and the critical debate it prompted) presents an opportunity to assess its influences and situate the work in the context of landscape history.

2.1 The Garden as Source

The most obvious result of the exhibition was the renewed focus on the garden as subject. At a time when landscape architecture was perceived as a stagnant field governed by analysis, a field in need of new models and approaches, the garden re-emerged as an evocative conceptual domain. "In the architectural design circles gardens are 'back'," observed landscape architect Laurie Olin (1986, p. 52). Gardens were fertile grounds for a designer's imagination, free of pastoral associations and the privately-held motives of property owners. Despite its ubiquity, the garden was eschewed as a valid source of investigation in both academia and professional practice in the 1960s and 1970s. In organizing the exhibition, Van Valkenburgh's premise held that as a viable subject of inquiry, as well an artful resolution to practical concerns, the garden could serve as a valuable prototype for differently-scaled landscape design. Noting how Lawrence Halprin's design for a private, residential water court inspired a later public plaza project, Van Valkenburgh suggested that "the garden has provided a subject for developing design ideas which formulated later inquiries in other settings" (1986, p. 6).

The idea of the garden as a metaphor for landscape relationships was emblematic of the late 1980s. "Garden" was interpreted broadly in significant texts of the era (Elkins, 1993). In key publications that appeared during this period, the garden was regarded as narrative, as in *The Poetics of Gardens* (Moore, Mitchell & Turnbull, 1988); understood as "idea, place, action," as in *The Meaning of Gardens* (Francis & Hester, 1990); and represented as allegory, as in *Green Architecture and the Agrarian Garden* (Solomon, 1988). In turn, the designers represented in the exhibition likened the garden to a billboard, an urban carpet, a language, a paradise, and a path to enlightenment. In his preface to *Transforming the American Garden*, Jory Johnson wrote that symbolism (the expression of intention) is what differentiates garden design from "landscaping" and elevates it to an art form, a creative practice rather than a craft (1986, p. 7). In his subsequent editorial for *Places*, Donlyn Lyndon distinguished gardening from garden making on similar terms, and discussed the declining emphasis on private gardens in professional practice (1986, p. 2).

As firms focused their efforts on public work, Lyndon hoped the same level of care and detail demanded by a garden would come to characterize the civic landscape. In correspondence regarding the exhibition (also reproduced in *Places*), Susan Frey, then editor of *Landscape Architecture*, claimed that "landscape architects have come out the closet to embrace the garden as the essence of their discipline" (1986, p. 42). Clearly, this multitude of meanings and approaches signaled a new conceptual territory for landscape architects, and laid the foundation for this timely exhibition and book.

Historically, a garden embodied a sense of care and management of the land for aesthetic purposes, and was differentiated from "landscape" by its complexity and function. In our collective imaginations, "gardens" have been concise spaces, shaped for intimate experiences; "landscapes" seem unbounded and created by ecological systems. The conflation of terms, and the impulse to clarify them, is long standing. In eighteenth-century England a "landscape" garden described a certain scale and interpretation of place. Today, referring to a landscape as a garden—or worse, a landscape architect as a gardener—is thought to be pejorative or trivializing. Curiously, Jean Feinberg, the former visual arts director at Wave Hill (a public garden and cultural center in The Bronx, New York), criticized one of the *12 New Landscape Designs* in her review for *Landscape Architecture* for the failure of its elements to add up to a "garden landscape" (1986, p. 52). Early modernists contested the prescriptive forms and traditional elitist values that defined previous Beaux-arts styles; they sought "freedom in the garden" and turned instead

toward theory and metaphor to inform their work (Treib, 1993). Comparable impulses characterized the twelve garden proposals.

2.2 The Pursuit of Discourse

As his primary inspiration for the exhibition Van Valkenburgh cited Fletcher Steele's essay for the 1937 exhibition *Contemporary Landscape Architecture and Its Sources*, mounted by the San Francisco Museum of Art (today the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), that framed issues relevant to contemporary landscape design by presenting state-of-the-art work. At that time, landscape architects had already begun to explore ways to move from a pictorial language of design to one more spatially involved, thus incorporating modernist ideals. Steele and others (including museum director Grace McCann Morley, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and architect Richard Neutra) described the contemporary garden as a functional outdoor living room, in which planting emphasized the architectural lines and volumes of the house. Given a similar framework of inquiry, what motives informed the work of postmodern designers fifty years later?

Jory Johnson, the curatorial assistant for *Transforming the American Garden*, envisioned the descriptive statements that accompanied each speculative design as the basis of a theoretical body of work that might expand the discourse and purview of landscape architecture. This desire for a more rigorous philosophical foundation echoed the preoccupation with literary theory and semiotics by architects in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In their search for new sources of landscape form and aesthetics, scholars at the time cited trends in ecology, semiotics and environmental psychology, and promoted "ecological humanism" as a possible foundation for the development of theory (Howett, 1987; Rosenberg, 1986). Seemingly endless references to the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, and Christian Norberg-Schulz could be found in the architectural texts of the period, supporting arguments for a reevaluation of the role of functionalism and representation in design. Asserting parallel beliefs in the necessity for meaning and intention, rather than purpose, to generate form, in their catalog essays the landscape designers also cited influences from Barthes and Lacan, as well as from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Paul Shepard, Richard Ellman, Hilton Kramer, Robert Venturi, Italo Calvino, László Moholy-Nagy, Mark Rothko and Robert Hardison.

Three decades ago visual analysis and visual assessment constituted the predominant focus of landscape research—studies that continued to support the traditional valuation of a landscape based on its scenic capacity. Against this backdrop, the twelve hypothetical gardens reflected the more conceptual and phenomenological realms of investigation that inspired many landscape architects of the period who sought to communicate "meaning" in their work. In his essay, "Must Landscapes Mean: Approaches to Significance in Recent Landscape Architecture," Marc Treib categorized ways in which landscape designers in the 1980s attempted to invest their work with meaning as "the Neo-Archaic, the Genius of the Place, the Zeitgeist, the Vernacular Landscape, and the Didactic" (1995, p. 113). Many of these approaches characterized the gardens in the exhibition. For example, in their proposal *Places for Peace: Garden IV*, Julie Moir Messervy and Peter Friedrich Droege simulated the psychological process of grieving as a call to action against nuclear proliferation. Like environmental and earth artists during the 1960s and 1970s, landscape architects had begun to treat landscape as a medium. These trends suggested a shift to a more experiential rather than visual aesthetic, and defined an era, as Catherine Howett observed, wherein "every formerly plain-Jane axis has been tricked out as a solstitial sight line" (1986, p. 48). In addition to the theoretical references and historical iconography cited in many of the proposed gardens, several designs attempted to "reveal" natural processes or make vernacular patterns "legible" to provoke or edify the virtual visitor. This development of sensitivity to the "agency" of the landscape (and the designer) became a dominant theme in the subsequent decade. For example, in his 1997 essay, "Ecology and Landscape as Agents of Creativity," James Corner explored commonalities between the human creative process and ecosystem processes as potential sources for more "meaningful" ecological design practice.

3 METHODS

3.1 Literature Review

Primary sources of information for this paper included the original, printed exhibition catalog and the original, print edition of the journal *Places* dedicated to criticism of the exhibition; informal dialog with several contributors of work to the exhibition and to the journal supplemented the literature review. The author conducted an extensive review of other key periodicals from the 1970s through the 1980s including

Landscape Architecture Magazine and *Landscape Journal* to examine shifting trends in professional practice and academic focus.

4 THE 12 NEW LANDSCAPES

4.1 The Floral Imperative

The competition brief specified that the flower, as a nexus for the relationships between humans and nature, should be the source of inspiration for the proposed gardens. However, the geographical, ecological, and cultural context of each garden was determined by the individual designer(s). The proposed gardens ranged from practical to idealistic, rational to absurd; some were explicitly metaphorical, some were conceived as artworks, others as landscape representations. Only half the entries dealt explicitly with the floral imperative or specified plant species, and specific site conditions informed only six of the twelve works. Details on media, materials, and dimensions were missing from the catalog, so those who did not see the exhibition based their responses solely on print reproductions of the work.

4.2 Garden Design

In addition to the self-conscious imposition of the designers' intentions, the twelve proposals shared a common spatial structure, using some form of grid or axial relationship to organize the space, and a colorful rendering style, typically executed in pastel tones. The ironic narratives or sarcastic overtones communicated in several of the designers' essays were echoed in the forms of their gardens. In their compositions a number of designers relied heavily on the tactics of juxtaposition and contrast, or created skewed and offset patterns typical of a postmodern idiom. Despite the provocative manipulation of scale in many of the designs, the resulting gardens did not read as subversive spaces, but instead appeared ordered and even congenial. These 'new' garden design vocabularies objectified the landscape as much as did earlier pastoral ones, but the patterning and serial structures evident in many of the works were a refreshing palette-cleanser from the naturalistic motifs that dominated landscape design in the previous decades.

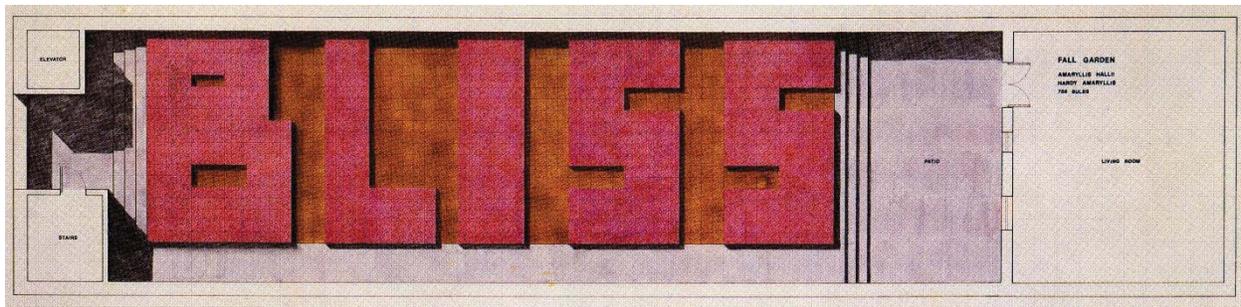


Figure 1. Pots of amaryllis envisioned on a Manhattan rooftop would offer commentary during late fall. "The New York City Bulb Garden," by Martha Schwartz. From *Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs*, ©Michael R. Van Valkenburgh, 1986. Used with permission.

4.3 Stylistic Signatures

Interestingly, the most plausible of the schemes in the exhibition were proposed by designers who have developed impactful practices and international reputations, especially Martha Schwartz, Warren T. Byrd, Jr., and Van Valkenburgh himself. While their respective approaches to environmental design have evolved in the intervening decades, signal tendencies apparent in their exhibited gardens persist in their work today. For instance, Schwartz's work is easily identified by her emphatic use of color, shape, a repetition of elements, and a Pop aesthetic; Byrd's abstraction of regional landscape dynamics remains the impetus behind much of his firm's work. Likewise, the gardens exploring more abstract themes were proposed by those who pursued careers in academia or art, for example, Chip Sullivan, Terence Harkness, and Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, whose methods of representation were more investigatory. The hypothetical designs

proposed for “realistic” sites—a rooftop, an urban plaza, a waterfront estate—were easiest to imagine being implemented. Schwartz’s seasonal bulb garden occupied a Manhattan rooftop (see Figure 1); Van Valkenburgh’s linear park traversed a city block between two buildings; and Teresita Falcón and Juan Antonio Bueno situated their residential garden on a lagoon in South Florida. Vincent Healy suggested no specific site for his healing garden, but its geometry and proportions relative to an adjacent building were easy to visualize as typical of an historic Italian villa.

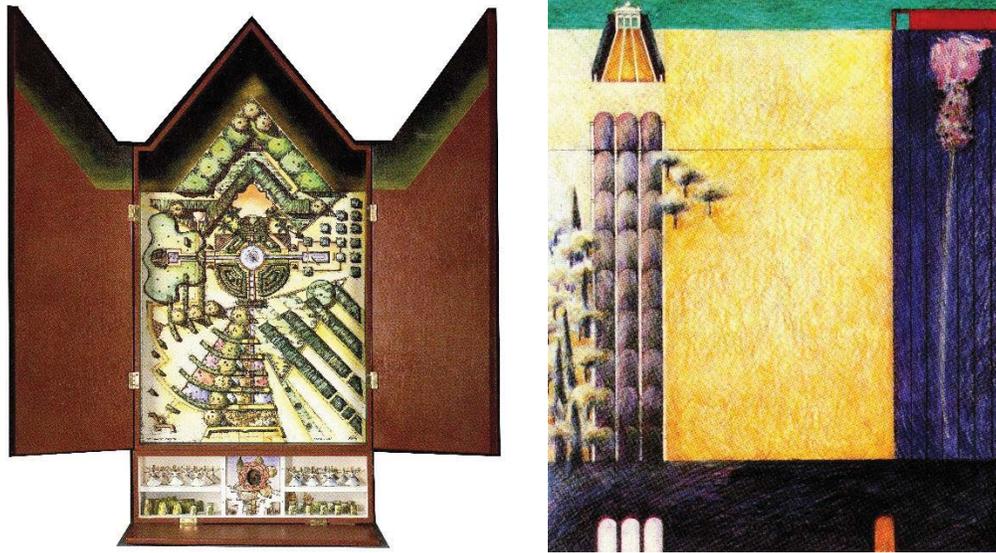


Figure 2. Left: “The Garden of the Rose: A Celestial Garden,” by Chip Sullivan. Right: “2 Fields + 3 Houses = A Landscape,” by Barbara Stauffacher Solomon. From *Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs*, ©Michael R. Van Valkenburgh, 1986. Used with permission.

More difficult to envision as built landscapes, yet most visually compelling, were the gardens proposed within metaphysical contexts (see Figure 2). Sullivan’s paired box constructions contained watercolor illustrations of a mystical rose garden that adapted the form and vocabulary of a Persian garden to a central Florida location; Solomon defined the “site” for her five richly-colored drawings of fields and structures as both the drawing surface itself, and as an estuary in San Francisco’s north bay (1986, p. 44). Her proposition alluded to the ambiguous framework of the exhibition upon which several critics commented. Byrd and Harkness alluded to regional contexts in their garden designs (see Figure 3), and the critics applauded their responses to specific, poetic qualities of place. In his proposed *Tidal Garden*, Byrd referenced the eastern shore of Virginia as a phenomenological edge—at the border between land and sea, where the straight lines of constructed tide pools and geometric garden spaces met the sensuous flows of an estuary, a path “exposed” and “protected” the visitor. Harkness paid homage to the prairies of east central Illinois through drawings and diagrams that captured the visual qualities of the vernacular landscape, particularly its horizontality; he wrote of the natural and man-made processes that “carve,” “slice,” “dust” and “drift” upon it. His edge marked where land met sky, and where divisions between garden and landscape—he thought—were indistinguishable.

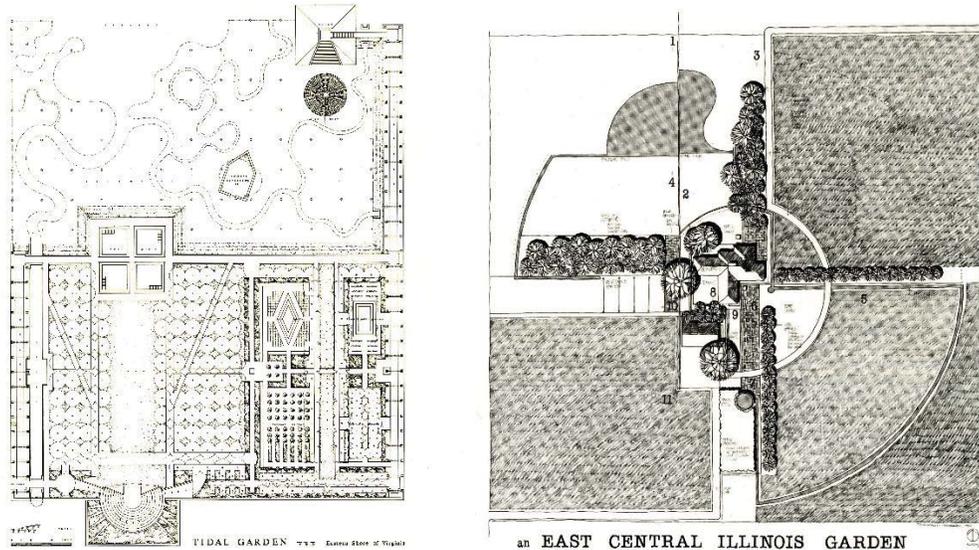


Figure 3. Left: “Tidal Garden: Eastern Shore of Virginia,” by Warren T. Byrd, Jr. Right: “An East Central Illinois Garden: A Regional Garden,” by Terence Harkness. From *Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs*, ©Michael R. Van Valkenburgh, 1986. Used with permission.

4.4 Visual Representation

As broadly as the designers interpreted their gardens’ contexts, their graphic formats and methods of representation were equally diverse. In his three-dimensional model for a garden cemetery Stephen Krog used a single material (which in photographs resembles terracotta) to represent a four-square grove of clipped and shaped horsechestnut trees. Schwartz drafted layout plans with conventional title blocks to illustrate the changing display of potted plants arranged to form the words “ignorance,” “evil,” “money,” and “bliss.” The mode of presentation ranged from straightforward plans, sections, perspectives and scale models to more abstract diagrams, drawings and collages. The “handmade” quality of the work—the diagonal Prismacolor-pencil strokes, the whittled Styrofoam trees, the brown Kraft-paper backgrounds—is conspicuous and contrasts sharply with contemporary, digital processes of production.

5 THE CRITICAL RESPONSE

5.1 Addressing a Need for Innovation

Critical assessments of the exhibition mirrored the spectrum of proposed designs, ranging from appraisals of the gardens as conceptual art to consideration of them as credible built form. Regardless of the criteria used, critics seemed to have agreed that landscape design at the time was in a sorry state. In his contribution to *Places*, Laurie Olin commented on the “aesthetically and sensuously barren” work of previous decades (1986, p. 52). Patricia Philips wrote in *Artforum* that “...these twelve projects cast new hope into this arid design field” (1986, p. 137). With this frame of reference, the *12 New Landscape Designs* provided a necessary infusion of creativity, if not controversy, into professional practice.

5.2 Postmodern Characteristics

In the early 1980s, *Landscape Architecture* ran a series of articles that addressed aspects of postmodernism and their relevance to landscape architecture (See Johnson, 1982; Eastman, 1982; Hester, 1983; Hargreaves, 1983; and Krog, 1985.) Landscape architect George Hargreaves argued that the postmodern aesthetic was derived from external sources of significance—from contemporaneous spatial and cultural systems—rather than from the internal logic of modernism. Several of these same themes resurfaced in the critique of the exhibition, including discussions of historicism, contextualism, formalism, symbolism and humanism. In their reviews for *Places*, Marc Treib and Catherine Howett both noted the

designers' appropriation of historical archetypes and classical garden features in the twelve proposals, and suggested that it was not a productive way to advance landscape architecture. The designers' attempts to forge a new identity for the American garden based on traditional design conventions, they thought, lacked authenticity. Robert Riley observed that if a garden is a collection of symbols, to succeed the symbols must be placed in the appropriate context: "it must use symbols that are commonly agreed upon and not just individually selected..." (1986, p. 45). Randy Hester echoed Riley's criticism of the self-referential gardens in the exhibit, stating that "obscure symbolism poorly translated isolates garden designers from their audience" (1986, p. 51).

5.3 Questioning the Role of Art and Utility

The function and role of art in the practice of landscape architecture was hotly debated in the 1980s, provoked in part by Steven Krog's essay, "Is It Art?," published in *Landscape Architecture* magazine in 1981. The question resurfaced in criticism of the *12 New Landscapes* exhibition. The lack of context for each of the gardens was problematic, with no clear parameters for evaluating them as either art or idea. Critics who defined landscape architecture as practical problem solving and who viewed design as a response to established goals, found issue with the hypothetical gardens which were "so self-consciously artful that the design concepts for the garden seem of secondary importance" (Howett, 1986, p. 48). They also questioned the role of art and abstraction in the exhibits, believing that "two-dimensional art theory is wrongheaded for the landscape" (Hester, 1986, p.51). Similar criticism applied to the theoretical motives expressed by the designers. For many of the reviewers the proposals were thought too clever, too personal, too symbolic, and lacking in technical expertise and ecological reality. Riley commented that "these twelve gardens do not give very satisfactory answers" to questions of meaning (1986, p. 45). Some found it difficult to reconcile a garden's content with its representation, finding merit in the illustration rather than the concept, or conversely, favoring the idea over its means of communication. While several reviewers found visual richness in the catalog reproductions, others, like Olin, thought some of the strongest proposals were represented by "the most vapid, precious, or anemic drawings" (1986, p. 54).

Criticism by practitioners, as published in letters to the editor of *Landscape Architecture*, was more dismissive of the potential of the *12 New Landscape Designs* to affect a transformation of professional practice. One writer questioned if readers were supposed to take "the Van Valkenburgh exercise" seriously, as he believed none of the proposals were valid prototypes for physical design (Baker, 1986, p. 16). Another criticized Byrd's rendering of vines growing clockwise around a pergola for violating the rules of nature (Whittaker, 1986, p. 9); Byrd responded that this reader missed the point and overlooked the basic intentions of the garden, as did Jean Feinberg when she remarked in her review for the magazine that his garden held "too many popular design elements" (1986, p. 52).

Virtually all the reviewers began their essays by defining the characteristics, or qualifying their understanding, of a garden. They uniformly acknowledged that gardens are functional landscapes, but to the question of whether a garden can (or should) function as art, their responses were mixed. Referring to work in the 1937 exhibition, Fletcher Steele wrote that regardless of style, gardens by their very nature "must 'work' and it must be evident, to the uninitiated at least, just how and why they work" (p. 23). Marc Treib applied a similar line of reasoning in his 1988 critique of Parc de la Villette, in Paris, when he argued that "The ultimate success or failure of such landscape designs does not ultimately derive from their intellectual origins, but whether or not they 'work' on their own merits as places and landscapes, without recourse to jargon and verbal explanations" (p. 119). These stipulations effectively summarize much of the criticism of the *12 New Landscape Designs*.

In 1988 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized *Landscape and Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, a symposium that examined the relationship between nature, culture, and the built environment. In his essay published in the conference proceedings, Stephen Krog discussed the utility of meaning and theory in avant-garde gardens, citing works he respected for their originality, yet thought superficial. (Interestingly, he commended Terry Harkness's *East Central Illinois Garden* for its authentic source of meaning.) He claimed, "Landscape architecture desperately needed the jolt of the Bagel and Necco gardens, and Tiffany and Harlequin plazas," but suggested that deeper meaning can only be built from a strong theoretical foundation, and this was lacking in landscape architecture (p. 100). A comparable observation could be made of the *12 New Landscape Designs*. Although the works themselves did not endure as precedents for subsequent projects, and the aesthetic models proved transitory in shaping landscape design practice, the need for substantive inquiry persisted.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Impacts of the Exhibition

By presenting the garden proposals in an art gallery, Michael Van Valkenburgh and his co-curators broadened the perceptual framework of landscape architecture, and provoked debate about the role of art in design practice as well. Architects had exhibited their hypothetical designs in similar settings for years (if not centuries) and investigated a wide range of related issues in their “paper architecture.” *Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, the 1937 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, was a first for landscape architects; subsequent exhibitions were mounted at the museum in 1948 and 1958. As did these earlier notable shows, *Transforming the American Garden* provided a valuable record of the ideologies, aesthetics, and methodologies that compelled landscape architects at the time, and served as a model for other public exhibitions of real and imagined works of landscape architecture. In 1998, Brenda Brown along with Terry Harkness and Douglas Johnston mounted an exhibition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign titled *Eco-Revelatory Design: Nature Constructed/Nature Revealed*. Inspired in concept by *Transforming the American Garden*, the catalog was published as a special issue of *Landscape Journal* and included fifteen exhibits and eight critical essays on the creative expression of ecological phenomena, processes and relationships. The intent of the exhibition and publication was to develop a theoretical and philosophical basis for practice as well as explore issues of representation and aesthetics in environmental design.

Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs centered on the role of conceptual design and theory in generating new landscape forms, and promulgated aesthetics rather than analytics as a more relevant approach to the design of the built environment. Although critics disparaged several of the gardens for being about themselves (Riley, 1986, p. 45), the injection of new ideas into what was generally acknowledged as a stale field was respected by those who found the mode of investigation “refreshing” (Cann, 1986, p. 46). The exhibition was important in framing landscape architecture as an art form at a time when the profession had no obvious aesthetic imperative. Although the postmodern stylings proved to be short-lived impulses, the designers’ artful explorations provided a critical step in the transition to the ecological aesthetic that drives innovation in the field today. Yet, one might question if history is destined to repeat itself—is current work evidence of a return to analysis, wherein the future role of aesthetics is limited to the artful representation of data? Examining the role of art and functionality in landscape architecture remains timely (Szczygiel, 2011).

Lastly, *Transforming the American Garden* brought attention to landscape architects from within the larger community of artists and design professionals. Citing the “sweeping changes in the field of landscape architecture” the July 1989 special issue of *Progressive Architecture*, titled “New American Landscape,” featured profiles of Michael Van Valkenburgh, [George] Hargreaves Associates, and the Office of Peter Walker and Martha Schwartz, along with portfolios of other landscape designers. Chip Sullivan, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, and Pamela Burton (who also contributed work to the exhibition) were quoted in the article. On the cover of the magazine was a photograph of a temporary landscape installation comprised by an alleé of dead shrubs spray-painted lapis blue, a carpet of fallen leaves, and a “temple” built from leaf debris; a white horse stood stage left. This image, like the *12 New Landscape Designs*, epitomized the style and trends of American popular culture in the 1980s. Although the exhibition did not serve to transform the garden through the production of new theory, it did introduce new approaches to design that were more diverse, imaginative, and externally-driven than in previous decades. The greatest impact of *Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs* was perhaps the legacy of creative and intellectual inquiry that continues to stimulate positive change in landscape architecture to this day.

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