

# The Hidden Value of Allotment Gardens in the Urban Context: The Alex Wilson Community Garden, Toronto

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## Introduction

*Jackie and Lorraine pose for the camera as they eat some soup. Today is our spring clean up where members get together to work in the garden and prepare the soil for another growing season. The sun is shining, the weather has warmed, and we are having a busy time. Five years ago, Jackie—homeless and in her early 20s—appeared at the garden like many others have. For several weeks, she slept on the ground at night and protected her 'adopted' plants by day, never saying a word to anyone. She was not a member, but she was welcomed just the same. Nobody knew Jackie's story although it was clear that she was dealing with some difficult issues. And Lorraine, a founding member of the garden, always made sure she was ok. Today Jackie is a regular member, who talks, asks questions, participates in the clean up, and tends to her allotment. She has a home nearby and an email address to remain informed about garden events. We still don't know her story, but we know that the garden has and continues to be an important part of her life (Brault 2008).*

Designers appreciate working on interesting projects, and I have had the good fortune of working on several during my career. One project in particular, although it has not generated a single dollar in income for my design office, has nevertheless provided worthwhile dividends year after year. It is a tiny community garden next to our studio in downtown Toronto, where roughly thirty to forty people from the neighbourhood grow food or flowers and maintain a small green space for the community. For ten years, I have observed countless episodes like Jackie's. I have also had the opportunity to reflect upon what this garden represents and the lessons it teaches, not only about gardening, but also about community, connection, sustainability and, ultimately, about design.

If one were to describe the general characteristics of this garden as one would describe a 'product' or 'building,' this description might include the following: The garden fits in a small space and costs little or nothing to use as it operates on solar energy and is made of natural and biodegradable materials. It requires little or no maintenance and becomes more beautiful over time. It is impervious

to weather and seasonal conditions and is accessible twenty-four hours a day. In addition to these basic qualities, the garden has the productive characteristics of helping build community in a neighbourhood by inspiring strangers to randomly meet each other and spend time talking face to face in a relaxed and convivial manner. It also creates a dignified connection between people from extreme socio-economic realities (i.e. a homeless person and a successful business person). It brings enjoyment, tranquil relaxation, and beauty, and it motivates people to freely give their time and expertise. It further allows people without private land to grow their own food, it develops horticultural skills and knowledge and, in this, raises awareness of living systems, organic agriculture, biodiversity, rain-water harvesting, and composting, while promoting healthy physical activity. Finally, this description might conclude with these environmental positive effects: The garden creates oxygen and absorbs carbon dioxide. It produces food for people and provides food and habitat for insects, butterflies, birds, and small animals. These are impressive features. In fact, it would be challenging to find other human-made goods that could make such claims. Yet these are actual outcomes of the Alex Wilson Community Garden and other similar 'products' that are called *urban allotment gardens*.

Urban allotment gardens exist in the heart of many large cities, often occupying vacant or abandoned lots and built from salvaged materials and rescued plants. They are cared for by city dwellers who do not own land and live in high-density areas, and who have a connection to gardening either through personal history, cultural background, and/or economic necessity. Onlookers and neighbouring residents sometimes complain about the messy appearance of these gardens. Policy makers and planners in both developed and developing countries have at times described them as 'undesirable' or even 'anti-modern,' and they are often destroyed to allow room for new buildings or other forms of urban progress (Irvine et. al. 1999, 35). Yet it is clear that urban allotment gardens address many relevant social and ecological issues. They are thereby filled with hidden value. They connect people to food, ecology, and living systems. They connect people to each other. They assist those with low incomes. They create a context where beauty or conviviality can happen at random. They link the micro to macro, and local to global. They bring joy, provide healing, and offer quiet contemplation in the heart of a busy city. They do it all quietly, gracefully, and inexpensively, without much involvement from the design profession. Urban allotment gardens fall between the cracks of landscape architecture, architecture, and industrial design, and seem all but ignored by the design profession. They are invisible, buried in the shadows of our man-made technologically driven, fashion-conscious world, where thin plasma TVs and Louis Vuitton handbags seem sexier and more modern than a patch of land with food plants in a noisy city.

### The Alex Wilson Community Garden: A Brief History

The Alex Wilson Community Garden was created in memory of Alexander Wilson, a Toronto writer, landscape designer, and activist. Wilson organized a community garden on a vacant lot next to his house in downtown Toronto where friends and neighbours gathered to grow vegetables, fruits and native plants. Shortly after his death in 1993, the landowner decided to sell the property. Wilson's friends attempted to buy the land to create a permanent garden in his memory, but the land was instead sold to a developer, and the garden was destroyed to make room for new construction. Wilson's friends decided to search for another nearby site where a community garden could be built in his memory. At the time, my partner, Dianne Croteau, and I were looking to create a community garden on a tiny ten-by-thirty-metre parcel of land next to our design studio on



Richmond Street West, just a few streets away from the original garden site. Through fortunate circumstances, we were introduced to some of Wilson's friends in April 1996 who were involved in the original garden (Lorraine Johnson, Lori Spring and Stephen Andrews, Wilson's former partner) and subsequently met to share intentions and ideas. Having already lost their original garden to development, Wilson's friends were hesitant to create a new one on land that could eventually become a construction site. They were looking for a permanent site. After reviewing several options, we decided the best solution was to donate the tiny property to the City of Toronto with a conservation easement registered on title. The land would become a public space, protected from future development; the easement ensured it would remain a community garden in perpetuity.

There was enough creative talent within the group itself to design the garden: Stephen Andrews, a visual artist and horticulturist, was Wilson's partner in the Garrison Creek Planting Company; Lorraine Johnson had authored several books on native plants; Laura Berman was a landscape architect and community garden coordinator for FoodShare; David Fujiwara was an architect, my partner and I were industrial designers. It was decided, however, that Wilson's legacy would be best served by holding a professional design competition, and for the next months, the committee's energy turned toward the organization and logistics of the competition. Guidelines were prepared, announcements were distributed, a competition document was published, and a site visit was organized. Over 140 teams registered, and when the deadline day arrived, sixty-seven entries were submitted. Each entry consisted of a scale model with a 300-word written description. Submissions came from architects, landscape designers and artists, the majority from the greater Toronto area. Each model represented a design proposal for the tiny site, and each was required to fit inside a larger context model that included the adjacent buildings. Participants were told that the winning entry would be constructed on the site, so in order to win, their design had to satisfy the competition criteria within our specified budget. In February 1997, a professional jury reviewed the entries with technical input from city staff and social agencies. Five finalists were



selected and interviewed and, ultimately, one entry was chosen as the winning design. The Design Exchange, Toronto's design museum, offered to host a major exhibition featuring the competition entries. A brilliant exhibit designed by Heidi Overhill was created with a minuscule budget using corrugated cardboard podiums positioned against a hand-painted mural of the winning site plan. During its four-month showing, the exhibition attracted several thousand visitors. Toronto's mayor viewed the exhibit and commented that every single proposal deserved to be constructed. The winning team consisted of two landscape architects, Kent Ford and Katherine Dugmore, and architect John Holmes. In addition to their prize, they were given a budget to prepare final working drawings. In June 1997, the committee organized a 'ground breaking' celebration, and soon afterwards, the small parking lot was demolished to make room for the garden. Terry McGlade of Perennial Gardens was hired to build the garden and many volunteers helped.

The design of the garden tells the story of our relationship with the southern Ontario landscape, from the shores of Lake Ontario with its sand dunes and native grasses, to the northern woodlands with white pine, shrubs, and pink granite. A meandering boardwalk travels the length of the garden connecting Richmond to Queen Street, creating a much-used route for many pedestrians who stop to enjoy a moment of tranquility in the busy city. At the centre of the garden, occupying most of the site, are forty, small, food-growing allotments, rented each year by people in the neighbourhood. Rainwater is collected in large tanks, and there are bicycle posts, tool sheds, compost bins, as well as a central circle for gatherings. Walls from adjacent buildings provide massive vertical surfaces for vines on both the east and west sides. From the designer's perspective, a garden must be approached differently than a building. Whereas a building looks best when it is new (and often empty), gardens become more beautiful with time. In the first year, the trees, shrubs, and plants are small and scattered, but as the garden becomes established, the emptiness fills in with lush foliage as the trees and shrubs mature. It is constantly evolving. The end of construction is simply the beginning of a process that will ultimately lead to an intended aesthetic, years away. The designer's responsibility is to provide a framework where this process can happen gracefully over time.



Photos on this and previous pages by Richard Brault.

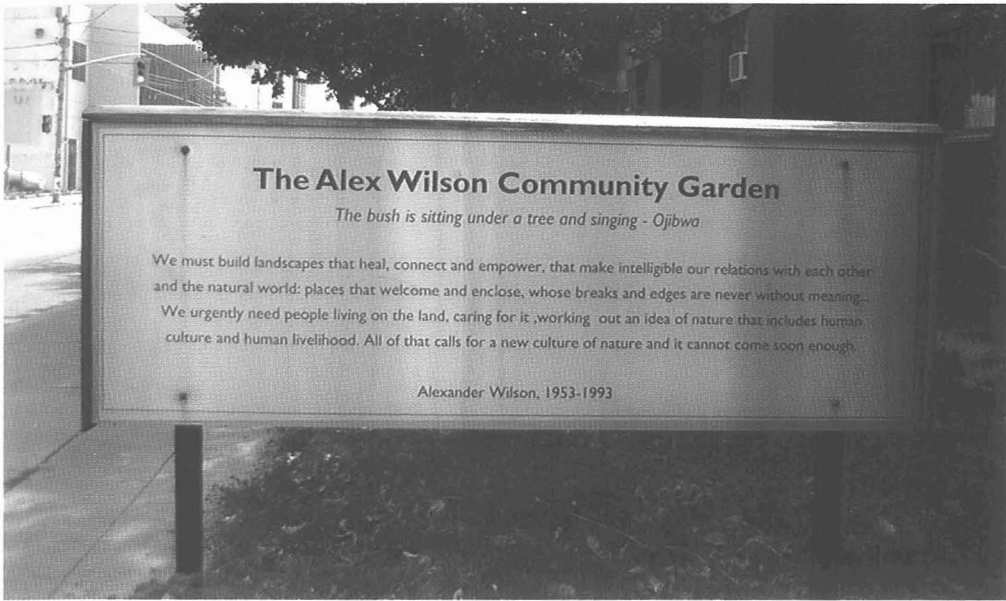
The official opening took place on June 21, 1998, and the neighbourhood greeted the Alex Wilson Community Garden with expected enthusiasm. They welcomed this tiny green oasis on a busy artery where evening rush hour commuters raced home from their downtown towers to suburban homes, unaware that people actually lived here among these low-rise converted factories and parking lots. This was home to a rich mix of people from all socio-economic and cultural realities. People rented the allotments and planted a variety of food crops or flowers. Members included professionals of all stripes: single mothers, the homeless, couples, artists, and people recovering from mental health or substance abuse problems. They all rubbed elbows and got to know each other. One member commented that she had lived in the area for twenty years and, until she joined the garden, didn't know anyone in the neighbourhood—typical of our urban existence where we can't stop to chat because we are always rushing to get somewhere. A retired university professor walked through the garden for eight years and one day started chatting with a member tending to her plants. He decided to rent an allotment. A widow moved into a nearby condo and was delighted to join the garden and keep her hands in the soil. A group of immigrant women came to grow herbs and learn English. Directly west of the garden is a non-profit social housing complex with forty-six units where residents deal with a variety of difficult challenges. Many of them participate in the garden. For some, it is their first garden experience.

Mike, a fifty-year-old homeless man who camped under the expressway bridge each night, came to the garden every day pushing an old bicycle loaded with his possessions. He helped during construction, and for five years, he watched over the garden, watered the trees and shrubs, swept the boardwalk, and built birdhouses from scrap lumber. He rescued abandoned plants from the neighbourhood and transplanted them in the garden. During the winter he would chip the ice from inside the frozen water tanks and place the large blocks at the base of the trees, creating a spectacular landscape of crystal. He made sure his homemade birdfeeder was kept full until spring. Mike accepted odd jobs to earn some cash but never asked for anything from anyone. A



local merchant gave him a part time job, and whenever he felt he had too much cash in his pocket, he'd knock at our studio door and ask if we'd keep it for him. We became his bank. Everyone knew Mike; he was the garden angel. Then one year, he didn't come back. Eventually we discovered that he was working for a landscape company, and after many years in the cold, was able to rent an apartment across town.

Each garden season begins with a clean-up day in April when warmer temperatures arrive. Returning members meet new ones and they prepare the soil, prune the shrubs, and lay fresh straw in the pathways. Everyone brings a vegetable for a large pot of soup that is cooked on-site and enjoyed after the work is done. Throughout the season, people tend to their allotment. Sometimes they meet other members or chat with visitors on the boardwalk. Life in the garden is informal and convivial. In October, members come together for the fall clean-up day, and once again, a big pot of soup is prepared and enjoyed. The winter months are quiet, with daily visits from birds and squirrels that stock up seeds and berries. As the Alex Wilson Community Garden enters its second decade of existence, the extent to which the small site is respected is remarkable. Given the fact that it is not gated, not lit at night, accessible twenty-four hours a day, and surrounded by graffiti-filled alleys, nightclubs, and considerable overnight activity, one would expect it to be an easy target for vandalism or other undesirable activities. There have been problems, but these have been relatively infrequent and reasonably minor. When they arise, the gardeners restore the damage quickly. There is always some trash, bottles or cans to pick up. One particular morning, after an oppressively hot summer night, I found thirty used syringes under the pine trees. On another occasion, a double mattress was removed from the same spot. Surprisingly, there has been no graffiti, considering that the alley directly behind the garden is one of Toronto's most active paint zones. The infrequent 'tag' appears every now and then, but it gets removed (recently by a graffiti artist who considers the garden to be a sacred space) or covered by a birdhouse that Mike built.



The food-growing allotments are rarely affected, but come harvest time, certain crops inevitably attract local poachers (both four-legged and two-legged ones). Occasionally a homeless person finds a quiet spot under the shrubs to spend the night in relative safety. Drunks have passed out on the boardwalk in broad daylight. There have been numerous discussions about gating and locking the garden at night, but some feel that more would be lost than gained. A community garden is as much about 'community' as it is about 'gardening.'

In 2003, the garden became entangled in a landmark battle with a developer who purchased the property on the south side of the street and wanted to build a forty-five metre condo, twice the allowable height. The additional height of the building would have blocked the essential midday sun and put the garden into a full-shade condition for most of the year. What seemed most disturbing was the architect's admitted lack of awareness of the community garden directly across the street. The developer's application was rejected by the City of Toronto for several reasons, but they appealed the decision at the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), a provincial body with a history of overturning planning decisions made by municipal councils in favour of development. At the OMB hearing, lawyers from the City of Toronto argued against those of the developer. Although the arguments revolved mostly around planning issues, the tiny garden generated considerable debate. The developer's consultants and expert witnesses insisted that the shadow impact on the garden from their forty-five metre building would be insignificant. The gardeners however, knew that the impact would not only be significant, but also threatened the garden's very existence. The developer's architects presented an eighty-page document with computer-generated shadow diagrams to support their argument. But upon careful scrutiny, it became evident that their document omitted the shadow diagrams where the impact on the garden was most severe. The only option for the gardeners was to challenge this document with an equally competent shadow study that showed the true impact, a process that took weeks of preparation. In their final decision, the OMB rejected the developer's application and ruled in favour of the garden's right to sunlight. The condo was eventually redesigned and built to comply with the existing height restrictions. Today the sun continues to shine in the garden.

## The Hidden Value of Urban Allotment Gardens

It is difficult to estimate the number of urban allotment gardens scattered across cities around the world. They are everywhere. Toronto has upwards of seventy gardens (Irvine et al. 1999, 34). Boston has close to 200 (Boston Natural Areas Network). They exist on vacant land, between buildings, or on rooftops in cities on all continents (Deelstra 1987). There are networks and associations that connect, educate, and advocate on behalf of allotment gardens at all levels. The Toronto Community Garden Network is a dynamic organization that promotes community gardening in Toronto, assists with implementation, organizes workshops, and publishes an extensive monthly e-newsletter. Other cities have similar organizations. The *American Community Garden Association* and the *National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners* in the United Kingdom provide support at the national level. The *Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux* represents fifteen national federations across Europe with more than 3,000,000 gardeners.

Urban allotment gardens address similar issues today as when they first appeared in early nineteenth century Europe at the dawn of industrialization: they provide a small piece of agricultural land to city dwellers as a means to grow their own food (Irvine et al. 1999, 36). At a fundamental level, they contribute to a family's survival during times of economic hardship. In Matalahib barrio, in Quezon City within metropolitan Manila, a remarkable allotment garden was created on one-and-a-half hectares between two squatter communities in 1980. It was initiated by two police officers who felt that the garden would reduce violence, bring the communities together, and help feed families. With technical assistance from a local NGO and university, as well as volunteer help from off-duty police officers, people were able to grow nutritious crops that met eighty per cent of the needs of 400 families. The Matalahib garden was, unfortunately, destroyed within two years to allow for development (Wade 1987).

In his book, *Get A Life* (1995), Dr. Wayne Roberts provides an eloquent summary of the hidden values that urban gardens offer, many of them validated by the experience of the Alex Wilson Community Garden. In addition to those social, cultural, and biological benefits described earlier, Roberts suggests that community gardens can "extend the constituency for city parks to 'passive' users often excluded from parks built around 'organized recreation' for [athletes]...create space for a 'new commons,' public space for hanging out that was lost when streets were taken over by cars...[and] offer a site for innovative partnerships with governments and charitable foundations, which can match grants to community 'sweat equity.'" At a cultural level, they "provide fertile ground for transplanting immigrant food traditions...[and they] teach respect for nature, farming, natural cycles and future orientation, as in Boston's inner city where Dr. Arturo Cervantes, supported by Schweitzer Urban Fellows, finds the most important work he can do from his clinic is to teach children how to garden because it teaches them to gauge future results from actions taken today; that is, you plant now, you reap in six months" (1995, 94-96).

Roberts argues that community gardens are an elegant form of economic and social judo "that turns the weight of a problem to advantage by flipping it into a solution" (1995, 96). Allotment gardens not only optimize limited resources, they also leverage them. Every dollar invested seems to create several dollars in value, whether from volunteer efforts or "sweat equity," as Roberts describes, to material and plant donations, to crime reduction, increased health, to the teaching and sharing of knowledge. The benefits extend beyond the food-growing needs of the urban poor. People living in big cities, regardless of their economic position, and particularly those living in





crowded residential towers, suffer from a general disconnection to the natural world and living systems. In ethnographic research conducted by environmental scientist Christopher Ferguson, city dwellers were asked what was missing to make their life more sustainable. One respondent who had moved from farm to city explained:

When you live in the city it is easy to become disconnected with the natural world. The more you become disconnected, the more you take advantage and abuse the things that supposedly make life easier (using the car all the time, buying food from all over the world, buying meat in Styrofoam containers), rather than understanding and connecting with what is around you (Ferguson 2008).

Ferguson found that people wanted ways to live more sustainably, and the opportunity to participate in activities like community gardens helped begin a process of connection that opened new perspectives and possibilities in all parts of their lives. Little by little people become aware of their consumption patterns, of the food they eat, the cars they drive, the products they buy (Ferguson 2008). Awareness is the first step toward meaningful change. If such opportunities are not readily available, or not within a three-minute walk from home (Alexander et al. 1977, 305), the connections are difficult to establish.

In his book *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (1991), Alex Wilson wrote:

We must build landscapes that heal and empower, that make intelligible our relations with each other and the natural world: places that welcome and enclose, whose breaks and edges are never without meaning. Nature parks cannot do this work. We urgently need people living on the land, caring for it, working out an idea of nature that includes culture and human livelihood. All of this calls for a new culture of nature, and it cannot come soon enough (17).

Community gardens contain countless opportunities and rewards for forward-thinking designers and educators seeking to bring their creative energies to an area that demonstrates great relevance yet remains largely untouched. At the very least, design intervention could improve their image from being perceived as 'anti-modern' to one where they are considered visionary in how they address a myriad of issues with elegance, economy and beauty. They deserve to become an integral component of a healthy urban environment, and an important element to the built-form requirements of any city. These gardens will never go away. They are like the little weeds that appear in the crack of a concrete sidewalk: They grow against all odds, reach for the sun, produce a flower, attract pollination, and spread their seeds. These seeds are falling on the doorstep of the design profession. Perhaps it's time to plant.

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- Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux: [www.jardins-familiaux.org](http://www.jardins-familiaux.org)