

Living Archives at The First Nations Garden, Montreal

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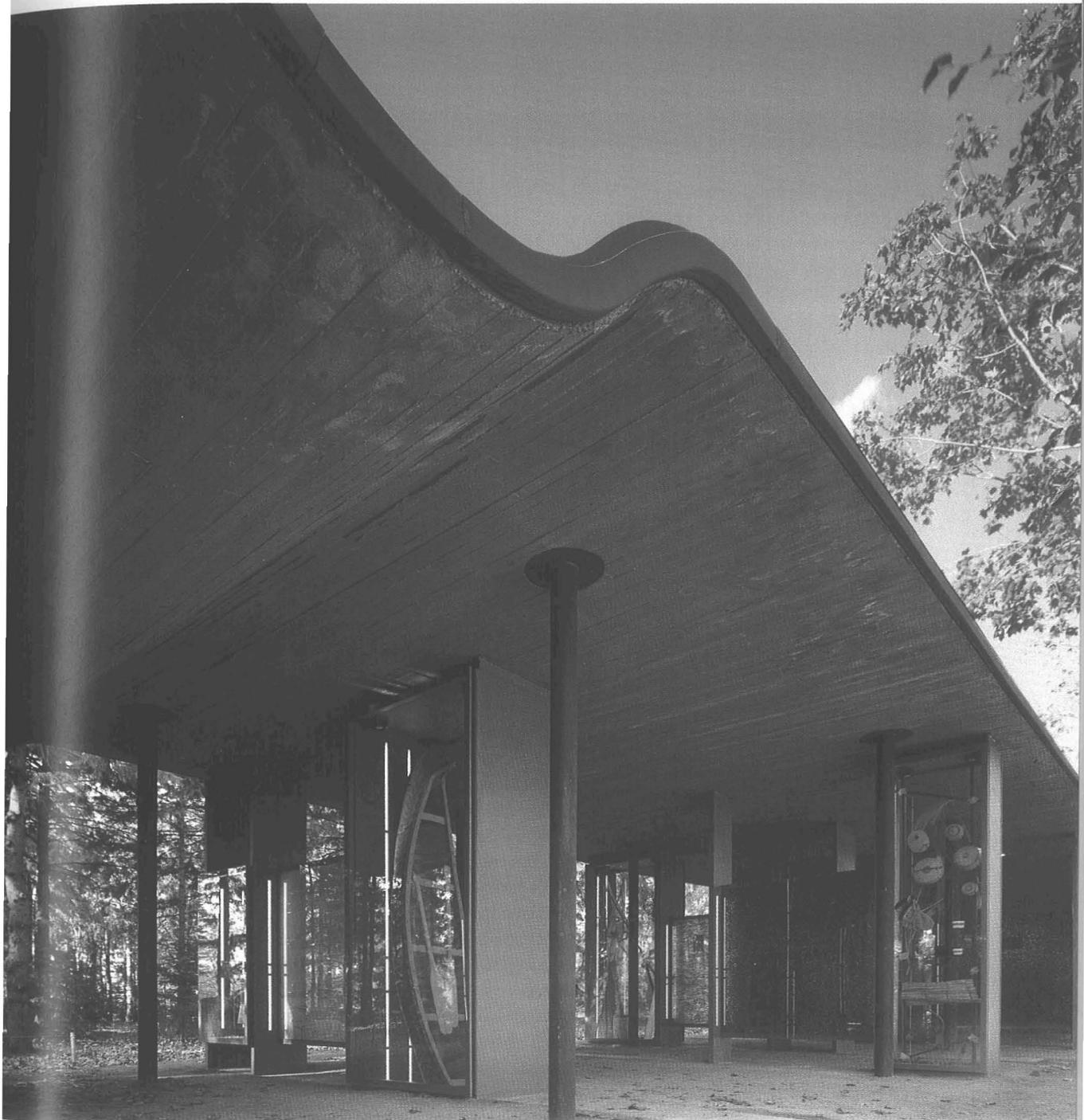
Because they include living materials and are influenced by the fluctuating conditions of nature, gardens activate another kind of time. Working with living materials entails a certain relinquishing of control, and despite the meticulous care bestowed on the gardens, there remains an inevitable uncertainty about outcome (Johnstone 2007, 9).

A garden should present a corresponding puzzle to be fathomed, some things very clear and others veiled (Jencks 2003, 25).

The First Nations Garden in the Montreal Botanical Garden is a municipally-funded horticultural site situated within the tradition of botanical gardens as public areas for leisure and eco-tourism. It is a pastoral garden consisting of indigenous plant species from Quebec, set on an area consecrated by the botanical garden's founder in 1934, Frère Marie-Victorin, to the botany of Quebec. The garden was inaugurated in 2001 as part of Montreal city-wide commemorations of the 300th anniversary of the 1701 Treaty, La Grande Paix (The Great Peace), between French colonizers and thirty-nine aboriginal nations (Havard 2001). This inception immediately situates the garden within colonial history and colonial relations—interpreted as an economy of negotiation and exchange, a relational rhetoric repeated in a number of ways throughout the garden's design, didactic materials and extended publicity.

Lucille Brockway (2002) has rigorously explored the role of botanical gardens in European colonial expansion, showing how they have historically served as repositories for the 'collection' of flowers, plants and trees within colonial and imperial regimes. One of the oldest botanical gardens, Le Jardin des plantes, housed within the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, was established under King Louis XIII in Paris in 1726 as the Jardin royal des plantes médicinales, then as the Jardin du Roi in 1739, and finally, as the Jardins des plantes after the French Revolution. The history of the famous Royal Botanic Kew Gardens in London demonstrates its conversion in 1760





The First Nations Garden Pavilion. Photos: Marc Cramer. Courtesy of Saucier + Perrotte architectes, Montreal.

from a private garden of leisure, into an "exotick" botanic garden and "arboretum of scientific intent," signaling its instrumental aspirations to contribute to scientific knowledge (Blunt 1978). On the one hand, then, The Montreal Botanical Garden elicits the history of traditional botanical gardens as aesthetic sites of tourism, contemplation and leisure, as well as scientific sites of botanical conservation, enlightenment and experimentation historically utilized in the service of colonial and capitalist expansion (Brockway 2002). On the other hand, the First Nations Garden within the very centre of this discursive space represents the role and practices of aboriginal people and cultures in the development of gardening and agriculture, and therein, might be seen as exceeding and surpassing any containment by a merely reductive, colonial account. This living garden thereby negotiates a provocative tension between two trajectories: the colonial violence and environmental destruction that haunts botanical gardens and the terrain upon which this very garden sits (Rice 2009); but simultaneously, its embodiment and enactment as a restorative, reconciliatory, growing and living organism that performs cultural and discursive practices in ways that are unpredictable, subject to climate and other contingencies related to tending and survival. This paper explores these two trajectories and their entanglements. It considers how the sensory experience and immersion into a natural, growing environment contributes to the unpredictability of living things, and introduces the idea of this garden as a form of living archive. It asks, how might a sensory analysis and notion of a living archive illuminate unique agri/cultural functions, meanings and the transformative possibilities of gardens?

While garden studies originated in art and architectural history (Conan and Quilter 2007), other disciplinary approaches have contributed to expanding primarily aesthetic and formal analyses, upholding that gardens are neither self-evident, nor merely aesthetic sites for contemplation. Gardens may be analysed as culturally-specific sites of meaning and history (Klindiest 2006; Conan and Quilter 2007). And in *The Meaning of Gardens*, Mark Francis and Randolph Hester describe how "The garden exists not only as an idea, or a place or action but as a complex ecology of spatial reality, cognitive process, and real work" (1990, 8). Clearly, as *living*, complex ecologies, gardens as sites of investigation present a number of disciplinary, epistemological and hermeneutic challenges.

Ambling through the First Nations Garden on a bright sunny day when I first began thinking about this garden several years ago, the peacefulness of the landscape allowed me to imagine myself to be anywhere in the countryside of Quebec, and not in the middle of a bustling urban centre. Moving from the Japanese Gardens at the east entrance of the Botanical Gardens (or the Chinese Gardens if one comes from the west), one transitions from the culturally-specific significations of Asian garden aesthetics (the minimalist Japanese Tea Garden and Zen Garden, or the Chinese pagoda, Tower of Condensing Clouds, and the Dream Lake Garden's thirty-foot mountain waterfall), to suddenly find oneself on a natural bark path, entering into a thick forest of coniferous or deciduous trees, depending upon which entrance one traverses.

The First Nations Garden sits at the very centre of the Botanical Garden. It is a naturalized, pastoral garden covering 2.5 hectares, consisting of 300 transplanted indigenous species from throughout Quebec. In being originally conceived to represent the region's botany, 5,000 trees were transplanted as seedlings in the 1930s, having substantively grown over the last seventy-five years to now anchor the site. A detailed site map shows the three different "zones" into which the garden is physically structured as a microcosm of regional representation: the Deciduous Forest, the Coniferous Forest, and the Nordic Zone. Didactic panels further associate these zones with eleven aboriginal nations living in Québec: the Abenaki, Malecite, Micmac, Huron-Wendat and



Pond, First Nations Garden, Montreal Botanical Garden.
Photo: Michel Tremblay. Courtesy of Jardin botanique de Montréal.

Mohawk in the deciduous region, where a longhouse dwelling and horticultural garden called the Three Sisters (where corn, beans and squash are grown) can be visited; the Cree, Algonquin, Attikamek, Innu and Naskapi in the coniferous region, where a large pond and experimental peat bog, as well as a summer camp are featured; while the Inuit, Cree, Innu and Naskapi are associated with the nordic zone, where a fall camp and smokehouse are on display. The public website describes the garden as a "crossroads of cultures, a place for sharing knowledge," and underlines its aims to present the "close bonds Amerindians and the Inuit have always had with the plant world" (Montreal Botanical Garden).

An interpretation pavillion sits in the centre of the garden designed by the Montreal firm Saucier + Perrotte Architectes, who are known for their subtle play of materials and textures, and their sculpting with ambient natural light. Stylish and elegant, the pavillion's elongated, mostly open-air structure measures 330 feet, and gently melds with the garden's naturalized landscape and cultivated 'wild' feel. No colour is used except those materials in their natural state. A variety of display modes are employed: there are several exhibition cases which house artifacts and crafts including a canoe, snowshoes, and cornhusk dolls. Several decorative glass screens alternate with these cases, containing yellow corn kernels, brown pinecones and red cranberries. This has the effect of shifting what are described elsewhere as having use-value as food and medicine (corn, pine and berries), to being on aesthetic display, de-emphasizing their gustatory and healing capacities through the visual distancing of aestheticization. A large embedded flat screen video monitor with sound loops a film entitled "Nature's Pharmacy," which documents the wild-crafting of herbs and plants and a fishing expedition. In 2004, a special mural display was introduced as an exhibition area for contemporary First Nations artists.¹ Within the garden, the winding paths all

lead to the interpretation pavilion, as plants, shrubs and trees are marked and identified, and others simply blend into the garden's ambient foliage. The tension between modes of aesthetic display and use value highlight a diverse economy of worth concerning plants. Lee Maracle highlights these contrasts in her novel, *Ravensong*, where protagonist Stacey, whose mother cultivates mint in their garden on a native reserve, looks on the 'white folks' gardens in 'white town,' and remarks, "We eat what them women are tossing," referring to "Weeds. Comfrey root, dandelion, plantain and mullein were all being tossed of a heap to disappear in a strong black garbage bag out of sight from the public" (1993, 31–32).

Over the last few years, I undertook several visits to the First Nations Garden and some of my initial questions expanded earlier ones I had brought to other gardens (Gagnon 2006): How can one investigate a garden in a way that doesn't limit the integrity of the site at the outset, nor presuppose interpretive meanings? (My impulse was to read the garden as a nostalgic cultivation of a pre-indigenous, pre-colonial landscape of Quebec's region.) How does one gather, record and compile data at a site such as a garden? How does one account for the changing nature of the garden as a 'living organism,' and privilege one moment in its seasonal cycles to 'record' and 'fix' its data? What is the relationship between empirical data gathered on site, and secondary materials, such as landscape design plans, or archival materials? Should designers, gardeners and cultural animators be interviewed? Should visitors be consulted? Should culturally specific inquiries be undertaken to address the First Nations theme of the garden? And where do these culturally specific characteristics reside? While the website indicates extensive efforts to be inclusive of First Nations' consultation,' the garden should not itself be mistaken as created by a First Nations community.²

My first objective was to identify the garden's sensorial qualities, and the specificity of its housing of living organisms, rather than to 'fix' the garden as a cultural 'text' to be decoded and interpreted. In response to the challenge of how to gather data and construct a cultural object for study, I brought a video camera and shot several hours of footage simply walking through the gardens. The use of videotaping was effective to document signage, text, general design and layout, plant types, lighting and sound, but less able to account for other forms of sensory information such as kinaesthetic movement, tactility, temperature/humidity, and olfactory qualities of smell. Video documentation seemed more comprehensive than traditional note-taking in the garden environment and was productive for future use in analysis and for presentation. I charted the Garden using Marina Panos' "Sensory Experience Chart" (2002, 281).

Auditory system: Ambient sound of immediate garden, such as birds (seagulls, ducks, sparrows), squirrels; there is a pond and stream, human visitors and tour guides. Events at Interpretation Pavillion on weekends include singing, drumming and dancing, cornhusk doll-making; especially musical sounds carry throughout the garden and beyond.

Ambient sound of botanical garden at large, and of the city: cars on Sherbrooke St., visitors in rest of garden, transportation trains and service vehicles within the botanical garden. Overhead aircraft.

Haptic system/Touch: Natural ground paths are soft (composed of earth and pebbles); within the forests there is natural woodland groundcover (woodchips, earth, sand); grass-covered meadows surrounding the pond and peat bog. Seating areas: natural stone and wood benches, grass. Plant textures are accessible. One may brush past branches in forests. Sun-exposed areas and shaded, sheltered areas change temperature on the skin and body. Basic Orientation/ Kinesthetic System: Winding paths converge into each other; you are surrounded by trees in the deciduous forest and coniferous forest. Difficult to get overall orientation within whole garden; sense of being in a natural Québec landscape, in the countryside. Slight undulations in terrain as one walks.

Visual system: Pastoral, naturalized garden; 'fences' are made of wood and rope to delineate paths; some prohibited areas marked by signs. Dominantly woodland, with some pond and meadow areas.

Identification tags and signage on plants; variety of didactic panels identifying historical and ethnographic information on local First Nations cultures, including medicinal plant uses and food uses.

The central design theme and aesthetic in the First Nations Garden is the production of a naturalized environment, which is reinforced through the visual, haptic, and kinaesthetic registers. There is a suggestion that this natural environment has use value in the healing powers of herbs and plants, a characterization that recurs throughout numerous didactic panels sprinkled throughout the garden itself, in the pavilion's video, publicity, and in the cultural activities animating the garden during the summer months. A sensory mapping demonstrates how historical information is carried through cultural meaning at various registers (visual, haptic and kinaesthetic) that are based in the body's experience of the garden space. As with other culturally specific gardens within the Botanical Garden, such as the Chinese or Japanese Garden, the First Nations Garden presents ethnographic information on First Nations cosmologies, myths and creation stories, cultural beliefs and practices, as well as ethnographic forms of display and labeling that are recognizable from anthropological museums. In this way, the naturalized sensory dimensions create a garden as a fully immersive environment that is interpretive and educational about First Nations horticultural, agricultural and cultural practices.

The insistence on a naturalized regional horticulture, and the supposed 'natural' proximity between aboriginal people and nature, reinforces recurrent forms of representation and public memory-work regarding First Nations culture, creating a peculiar sense that the garden is somehow engaging in the 'return' of the land to its rightful guardians.³ The restorative, reconciliatory rhetoric of the Garden may be seen as allaying or superceding violent histories of colonialism that have dramatically altered the horticulture and environment of the region in the first instance, an impact that is strangely reinforced by the horticultural necessity and labour of *transplanting* indigenous flora back into the boundaries of the garden. In an analogous moment of imperial oscillation, Robert W. Jones (1997) notes how nineteenth-century spectators at the zoological gardens of Regents Park in London, could occupy a dual position at once in London but also elsewhere:

The Zoo works metaphorically here as a moment of transportation, while simultaneously acting metonymically to condense the globe into the space of the gardens. In bringing together tundra, swamps and plains the zoological garden acts to construct a single space for the imperial imagination, demarcating a place which is encompassing and encroaching (8).

As Derek Gregory summarizes in conclusion: "It is this double passage – from there to here, and back again at will – that marks the operations of colonizing power" (2001, 95). Yet some of the plants have refused to flourish in this forced transplantation. Garden signage does not necessarily guarantee that an actual plant is there. The occasional 'failure' of nature to thrive in this microclimate—some labeled plants are dead or simply not there, especially in the nordic zone—seems to defy the constructed 'reality effect' of the garden's pastoral design and naturalization. How does one account for the gap between the garden's abstract idea or the landscape architect's design indicated by the signage, and the garden's 'failure,' in that some plants are simply not thriving as originally envisioned? Yet does this 'failure' challenge the 'reality effect' of naturalization? Or

might it actually *enhance* it, by demarcating failures, affirming the fragility of nature, marking those very boundaries where it rebels against human control, and dies? Employing an experiential hermeneutics to explore the First Nations Garden's status as a 'natural' growing landscape evokes a consideration of embodiment in gardening and tending, in walking through the garden. Is there a way in which the embodied actions required of gardeners, cultural animators, and garden visitors can be more effectively understood from an analytic orientation that considers the site itself as a form of archive? Can the plants, trees and landscape themselves be considered to be embodied, changing life forms, with transformative capacities? As Michael Pollan has written, "After ten thousand years of coevolution, their [plant] genes are rich archives of cultural as well as natural information" (2002, xvii). While archives are traditionally considered to be physical repositories for the caretaking of (usually) written documents, one could understand the garden to itself constitute a living archive of the region's indigenous plant life. The living, cyclical existence of the plants is a testament to biodiversity, and a living preservation of the biodiversity of the plants that are grown and cultivated on this exact site.

In addition to thinking of the transplanted horticulture as constituting a living archive or living memory of the region's indigenous plant-life (thereby compounding a notion of a plant-embodied present past), there is an uncanny effect, which is the enhanced sensation that the garden is somehow 'inhabited.' This is created in the dwelling areas, such as the wigwam and tipis, as well as in the growing vegetable garden, The Three Sisters, a sustenance garden with edible corn, beans and squash, which are all suggestive of a living domestic space. As a garden visitor, one seems to enter into a *narrative* of a First Nations lifestyle in this microcosm of the region, where visitors seem beckoned and welcomed into these gardens. One almost expects to bump into inhabitants undertaking traditional modes of life as suggested by various props and historical accounts throughout. Interestingly, it is in the absence of other sensory elements—such as the olfactory, in the smell of a burning hearth, of foods being prepared or cooked, for instance—that the sensation of the garden being inhabited is undercut by a more sanitized and eerily vacant space that thwarts the possibility of any seemingly authentic experience. This eerie temporal-spatial effect is made further unsettling with the conventional narrative presentations performed by the living displays of First Nations interpreters and animators, who in giving tours throughout the park, employ a rhetoric that describes the Native cultures as being their own, and that visitors attending the didactic sessions are encountering intimate, first-hand knowledges.

The First Nations Garden is a provocative living site that perfectly engenders Charles Jencks sense that a garden should offer a puzzle to be fathomed, or in Lesley Johnstone's words, propose more questions than it answers in "another kind of time" (2007, 9). Through its naturalized, constantly changing living and growing spaces, the First Nations Garden draws attention to the colonial foundations to which it is inevitably bound, but also to the unpredictable, wild possibilities that the particularities of plants and nature enable. As the cultural geographer Derek Gregory has written, in examining connections between colonial productions of space and colonial productions of nature, it is necessary to consider that although the analysis of cultural practices is important, one may also need to allow "that nominally 'natural' organisms and physical systems also have the capacity to make a difference" (Gregory 2001, 87).

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were first presented at the *Sensory Collections and Display Conference* (Concordia University, 2005) and *Greenscapes* (Brock University, 2007). Thanks to Jennifer Fisher, Jim Drobnick, Shelley Butler and David Howes for insights.

1. The First Nations Garden Cultural Animator and artist, Sylvie Paré has commented that the Garden's 'ephemeral mural' is potentially interesting to First Nations artists, because in contrast to the symbolically overlaid location of the museum, the garden "is a neutral site, a site of peace that can inspire or simply be used as is" (my translation; Gagnon and Fung, 2006, 129).
2. It is important to recall the broader context of the Montreal Botanical Garden, and not make any claims that consultation with Native community members constitutes a fully collaborative process.
3. Michael Lee Ross describes in his introduction to *First Nations Sacred Sites in Canada's Courts* (2005), how the Inter-American Court of Human Rights delivered a landmark decision for the Americas with *The Mayagna (Sumo) Awas Tingni Community v. Nicaragua*, in 2001, defining the "collective rights of indigenous peoples to the free and full enjoyment of their lands and resources." He interprets this to include the "physical presence but also a physical dependence on the land – the land (including its plants and animals)..." [2005, 1–2].

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