An American at Westonbirt: My Garden at the 2005 Westonbirt Festival of the Garden

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Abstract
Garden festivals first captured my attention 10 years ago with their intense, poetic images and previously unseen garden forms—sprouting woven willow fences; beach chairs and sun collectors strewn about a sunflower field; floating islands of exotic plants surrounded by glass bottles; a caged frozen bird hanging on a dead white tree; blue glass gravel beads. Like poetry, these temporary garden creations are succinct and intense, distilling an idea into a calculated, original, formal composition. Instead of words, they comprise selective plants, materials, and patterns.

Disciplines
Environmental Design | Landscape Architecture | Natural Resources and Conservation | Nature and Society Relations

Comments
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ARDEN FESTIVALS FIRST CAPTURED my attention 10 years ago with their intense, poetic images and previously unseen garden forms—sprouting woven willow fences; beach chairs and sun collectors strewn about a sunflower field; floating islands of exotic plants surrounded by glass bottles; a caged frozen bird hanging on a dead white tree; blue glass gravel beads. Like poetry, these temporary garden creations are succinct and intense, distilling an idea into a calculated, original, formal composition. Instead of words, they comprise selective plants, materials, and patterns. These experimental gardens—bound only by the limits of human imagination, the size of the site, and a budget—have inspired me to be more daring in my own work as well as in my teaching, where I encourage my landscape architecture students to fantasize and dream in their designs before they enter the real world of constrained budgets, fickle clients, politics, and office constraints. Participation in garden festivals can also allow practicing landscape architects to take risks, experiment, and make their dream designs a reality, if only for a few months.

As venues for garden festivals increase, their programming is expanding to position the events as cultural, recreational, and educational centers as well as viable commercial ventures. Growing public interest in garden festivals can give new exposure and publicity to a landscape architect's work, because visitors include tourists and gardeners as well as other landscape architects and designers. The International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire, France, which opened its first show in 1992, has become a new breeding ground for these contemporary garden designs. Following my visit to the Chaumont-sur-Loire festival site in 2002 (see "Perspective" in "Nature Aroused," Landscape Architecture, January 2003), I decided to pitch my own design to Chaumont. I failed on my first attempt.

The following year, I tried again, this time at a second European venue for garden design experimentation, the Westonbirt Festival of the Garden at the Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire, in southwest England. My colleague, David Meyer, ASLA, had sent me a New York Times story of the 2003 Westonbirt Festival featuring a photograph of his own graceful garden exhibit there. I decided to enter a design—The Otherworld Garden—in the 2004 competition, and it was accepted.

The Competition. The initial design process required me to read and decipher a long and tedious list of rules and regulations. I submitted proof of an existing body of work and my ability to carry out such a project. I was required to com-
plete a cost estimate and to show that I had addressed safety and accessibility factors in my design proposal. The garden had to conform to a small allotment of land (up to 200 square meters) and a budget of £15,000, from which I had to allocate costs for material, contract labor, and expenses. (By the end of the festival, travel and accommodation expenses during visits and construction periods had consumed a quarter of the budget, and labor and materials consumed the other three quarters, leaving no money for a designer fee). The acclaimed competition jury was composed of TV garden show presenters and garden magazine critics/editors. My design proposal—consisting of conceptual and construction drawings—required high articulation and visual appeal to pass their rigorous review.

The Westonbirt competition design brief had called for designs that gave people “ideas to steal” that were original, witty, inspirational, and strong in form. Intrigued and entertained by the request for such ideas, I set out to create a garden that would encourage “stealing”—by incorporating stones that could be taken away. My garden proposal took advantage of the famous local Cotswold limestone. I proposed encasing it in a triple-spiral path and using it for sculptural gabions of strikingly large animated sculptures half buried in the ground—a horned helm, a ritual mask of Cernunnos (the spirit of animals and patron of hunters and warriors), sacred cauldrons, a Greenman, a ram-horned serpent, and Celtic earth mother Sheela-na-Gig. Other stones, stamped with the names and symbols of on-site trees, were left lying around so that people could take them as souvenirs. This idea was part of a complex narrative that draws concepts, symbols, and language from the cryptic Celtic cultural heritage that left its marks on the surrounding English landscape (for example, Stonehenge, Avebury, and the burial mounds known as “barrows”).

**The Planning Phase.** In mid-December, a few weeks after I had sent in my entry, I received a congratulatory phone call from festival founders and organizers Jan Chillery and Thérèse Lang of TJM Associates, telling me I had been accepted. I then began a four-month-long planning process that included finding sponsors and suppliers, traveling to the site, and meeting the many people involved in making the event happen. This process took a great deal of time and energy, partly because of the distances involved.

In late January, I was invited to a “debriefing day” for the gardens’ designers led by Phil Morton, Westonbirt Arboretum’s events manager. During this initial three-day visit, I saw the site for the first time and met with the organizers, the public relations representatives, and the Westonbirt Arboretum’s team. At the same time, the dedicated public relations office, Focus PR of London, began an intensive promotional campaign for the Westonbirt Festival of the Garden, contacting dozens of England’s gardening, lifestyle, and design magazines and other mainstream media. During this same visit, I made numerous phone calls and drove hundreds of kilometers (on the left side of the road) to meet with and secure...
local stone and plant suppliers, who also agreed to be my partial sponsors. (The prospect of 130,000 visitors and the promotional venues that would be available at the festival were effective bargaining tools.) An internet search, which I conducted before I arrived, for a possible contractor and suppliers proved helpful during this actual visit.

In the remaining months prior to construction, I continued to make contacts with sponsors, suppliers, and local contractors. I drafted a Bristol City-based metal artist, John Packer, for the project, and soon after, he began working on refining the final design and devising a technique for the construction of the sculptural gabions. Until actual construction began in May, I continued to refine design details and the budget and to make plans for the construction period. I also visited Bristol again to revise and test with John the construction technique of the triple-spiral path for the garden. A dozen or so forms had to be completed and signed, including liability insurance and risk assessment.

The design board above shows plants, access and orientation, and structural elements. A section through the garden is below.

Implementing the Design. Thirteen teams, eight British and five international (France, Germany, Norway/Canada, and the United States were represented), were on site as work commenced on May 4. Unlike a few who contracted their gardens fully or partially to local contractors, I built the garden on my knees and with my own hands (with the aid of local labor). The construction period proved harder than expected for me because I was unfamiliar with the soils, the climate, and the somewhat slower pace of work in England. Brits living two or three hours away typically left for home by the end of the day, while we foreigners bedded down in local B&Bs.

During the first couple of weeks, the site resembled a frenzied beehive, dominated by the sound and action of trucks (or "lorries") and earth-moving vehicles. A safety fence surrounded the festival area to secure the equipment and materials on site and to protect
visitors wandering by from other parts of the arboretum. Local teams, equipped with forklifts and diggers, scraped and excavated, piling soil and stone to the side, and put in infrastructure pumps for pools, concrete foundations for fences and walls, and pipes for drainage. Arboretum personnel worked feverishly to ensure the protection of tree roots on site, and health and safety officers visited each garden daily, repeatedly evaluating and discussing possible public safety concerns. Rain or shine, the work continued uninterrupted, and I learned how to survive daily English showers and muddy soil. Accordingly, I changed the path surface from mowed grass into fine gravel cover and added gravel buffer strips along the spiral gabion so that walking areas would not turn into mud pits. After eight days, as I was just beginning to see some meaningful forms emerging on the ground in my garden, the highly efficient and organized German team led by Petra Bittkau and Friedrich Bartfelder, who had brought their entire office of six designers and a truck complete with all needed equipment, were done building their daisy garden. My hard-laboring local hires and I could not hide our jealousy.

The weather was calmer during the last two weeks of construction, allowing me to plant the blue, pink, and purple flower carpet I had chosen—Ajuga reptans, Diascia whisper, Petunia surfinia, and Verbena tenari—and giving the plants enough time to acclimate. John Packer brought the finished mesh-wire sculptures, and a student of mine, Ian Hampson, helped to install stones in the six sculptural gabions, bringing them to life in the shady, wooded part of the garden.

The Garden Festival. During the final week of construction, several teams were still in full swing, and I was putting the finishing touches on my garden. The organizers ran around madly, and the local team put in long hours in a last-minute effort to tidy the festival site and make it presentable. An hour before reporters arrived on June 3, which was press day, instant lawn carpets were still rolling over soiled scars and damaged lawn spots. For the first time in a month, I replaced my work clothes with a nice outfit. An army of photographers attacked the gardens from all directions. At midday, a bus full of dignified reporters and critics arrived from London. Stephen Anderton, the gardening correspondent of The Saturday Times, gave a champagne toast and an introduction at the arboretum’s elegant Oak Hall. We all held our breath, hoping the VIPs from London liked what they saw. Local TV crews filmed garden scenes, and designers waited at their gardens for interviews.

The next day, opening day, saw the real crowds. Garden designers watched, conducting “behavioral observations” as their gardens were left to the mercy of joyous kids and put to the test of contemplative adults, to their comments and instincts, their use and abuse, their praise and delight, or their criticism and weariness.

For two days, I sat anonymously in my garden, taking pictures, shooting a video, and mostly listening to and watching people. I saw the 110-meter-long, triple-spiral path—made of gabion mattress and set in a sunflower carpet—become a playful labyrinth walk for children and adults alike. The spiral was continuously animated by the motion of encircling, cheerful people. I listened to exclamations of surprise as people entered the dark side of the garden and discovered the ramhorned serpent, or the “dragon,” as the kids called it, and the giant Greenman. I watched children and adults eagerly picking stones from the sacred cauldrons, stamping them, and then turning to find a resting place on a branch or in a tree cavity, to place their marked stone as an offering to the spirits of the wood. Children returned to walk the spiral again and stamp another stone. I was told that a few weeks after I left, a storytelling event took place at night among the floodlit sculptures of my garden. The joy of people and the life my garden took on were my true rewards for the project.

Overall, I found the process of planning and constructing a garden in a different country to be a great challenge but a stimulating experience. Doing hands-on construction and making decisions on site is a healthy process for designers and especially academics. Both successful and failed gardens offer worthy lessons.

The contemporary garden is expanding its boundaries, and American landscape architects can and should contribute their positions and talents to the ongoing international garden festival scene. Creating designs for temporary garden festivals is an intense and concise act that brings out our latent energies and creativity.

Mira Engler is an associate professor at Iowa State University and the author of the book Designing America’s Waste Landscapes (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).