

## **GARDEN DREAM AND REALITY**

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### Abstract

This paper is an investigation of how gardens exist in people's minds and how they in turn become a physical reality. Most physical gardens represent the mental image that their creators have of gardens. Yet a variety of factors affect both the physical reality of a garden and people's images of what a garden is.

Mental images of gardens exist independently and influence the actual realization of the garden as a physical place. However, equally important are the resources of the gardener and the physical attributes of the space itself. The shape a garden takes is dependant on the space it occupies, and this can include its social location in a community and relationship to the home. The garden form is also bounded by its horticultural possibilities, which include such things as the climate and condition of the soil. Resources important in the realization of a garden are also linked to the gardener who creates it. Factors having to do with the availability of time and money as well as horticultural skill, interest and ambition are crucial in the development of a garden. Equally important can be demographic factors such as age and family composition.

The mental image of gardens also contains basic assumptions of what a garden is, and can vary considerably between gardeners and over time. These assumptions are affected by experience with gardens both at a personal and cultural level. Often the gardeners environmental history, which depicts their experience with or exposure to gardens, can affect what they envision a garden to be. Social and cultural factors, such as class and ethnicity, can influence both the concept of a garden and how it becomes a reality. Aesthetic preferences also play a large part in the image of an ideal garden, and this process can be modified to fit the space or resources available.

In order to discover how the mental image of gardens turn into a physical reality we will conduct interviews with gardeners over time. A longitudinal approach is important since the mental ideal of the garden can change over time, as the garden as a physical entity certainly will as it matures. A photographic method will be included both to document the garden space as it evolves, and to have the gardeners photograph it in order to illustrate how their garden dream has become a reality.

## **Introduction**

Gardens exist in people's minds as well as in physical spaces. Most physical gardens represent the mental image that their creators have of their gardens in some way, yet the objective reality will not always match the subjective one. This paper will discuss how the mental images of gardens impact the creation of a physical garden, and a variety of factors which affect both the garden place and the gardener's image.

Although mental images of gardens exist independently and influence the actual realization of the garden as a place, factors inherent in the physical space also shape its existence. Its horticultural possibilities are bounded by the earth and climate, as well as by the resources and interests of the gardener. Availability of time and money, as well as social and cultural factors influence both the concept of a garden and how it becomes a reality. The gardener's environmental history, which shows their experience with and exposure to gardens, can affect their aesthetic preferences as well as their vision of a garden. Gardens are created and given meaning through personal, collective and cultural processes.

To discover how the mental image of a garden is translated into a physical reality, we will conduct interviews with gardeners over time. Using a photographic method and a longitudinal approach, we will capture the process of 'how do' people create their gardens and turn the dream into the reality. Along with verbal explanation, a photo elicitation method whereby gardeners will photograph their gardens at different points in time will allow us to understand the factors influencing the gardener's image as well as the garden shape and character.

## **Garden Place and Attachment**

Gardens occupy physical space, but are also places with meaning attached. Places have three necessary and sufficient features that are bundled together; geographic location, material form or physicality, and an investment in meaning and value (Gieryn, 2000). Thus a place is not just a space, detached from material form and cultural interpretation. Instead, a physical space becomes a place

when it encompasses such things as identity or memory. Places can depict a sense of control or mastery over the environment which relates to self identity, and the molding of a space to reflect who we believe we are. Places are also flexible and changeable over time, which is especially apparent with gardens.

Gardens are physical places that have been invested in at a both a physical and emotional level, and often have great meaning for the gardeners. Gardeners are attached to their garden place in a variety of ways, and this place attachment has affective, cognitive and behavioral components (Low & Altman, 1992; Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983). Gardens have a simultaneous existence as an idea, place and action (Francis & Hester, 1990). In order to understand a garden's meaning, we must also investigate how it was created. As stated by Francis and Hester (1990),

“One cannot examine a garden as a physical place without probing the ideas that generated the selection of its materials and the making of its geometry. One cannot fully understand the idea of the garden without knowing something about the process that created it...The garden exists not only as an idea or a place or an action but as a complex ecology of spatial reality, cognitive process, and real work.” (p. 8).

Gardens are places of expression and meaning, not simply a space where things are grown from the earth. As stated by Anne Raver (1995), they have a physical as well as a cognitive reality, and the image of the garden can be as meaningful as the actual place.

“I'd always thought of weeding as such drudgery. And it was, in my father's garden. Work, pure and simple. Because it was his garden, his vision, it had nothing to do with mine. But now that I have my own garden, I realize that it exists on two planes. It grows on an earthly plane, of course, subject to the vagaries of sun and rain...and my own energy and moods. But it also exists, in a more profound way, in my mind, where it has been growing for many years now. It is a complex vision of many dimensions that has little to do with the earthly garden, where plants get eaten by insects or succumb to disease or my own neglect... It's a garden that I carry with me like a happy secret, as I go about the clamorous world outside the garden gate.”(p. 161)

Gardens, landscape and the natural environment can exist simultaneously in people's minds as image, as part of their experience, and as a physical reality.

Attachment to a place can be powerfully influenced by individual's environmental memories, which can include gardens from childhood. The memories can be expressed in how we create our environment, and relate to a need for continuity with important places in our past (Marcus, 1990).

Both the image and realization of a garden can be affected by our environmental histories and the need to recreate a place that is familiar and makes us feel at home.

Although much research has been done on people's attachment to places, the most common focus has been on people's positive experiences with their residences. However, there are a range of places to which we become attached, and those attachments can be positive as well as negative (Manzo, 2005). Since gardens are often linked to the residence and adjacent to homes, attachment to them can be connected to the meaning of home. Attachment can also occur with individual gardens created in a more public and collective context, such as community gardens in the United States and allotment gardens in Europe.

### **The Gardeners Image and Resources**

Each gardener has personal factors that guide the image of a garden and these can have both individual and social influences. Factors which affect a gardener's image of a garden include their environmental history and experience with gardens, cultural and social ideals, and individual aesthetic preferences. A gardener's internal resources play a large part in the image of a garden they desire, and guide the creation of their garden.

People's early experience with nature and gardens will affect their basic assumptions about gardens. Garden images can reflect childhood encounters with nature and gardens and their cultural references to what a garden is. Many people recreate childhood gardens in different forms as adults.

The resources that gardeners bring to bear on the creation on their gardens are various. Those most traditionally thought to be garden resources include a wide variety of reference and educational materials that instruct gardeners in 'how to' create the perfect garden. A multitude of books on gardening exist. Many gardening books are essentially manuals in how to achieve progress from A through Z, often proposed in the simplest terms possible (Christopher & Asher, 1997; MacCaskey & Marken, 1999). Others offer information on garden techniques, specific plant types, or plants in particular climates and regions (Brickell, 1995; MacCaskey & Ocone, 2005; Marinelli,

1998; Scanniello, 2005). Many others are pretty coffee table books, teasing and rebuking gardeners with perfect snapshots of a moment in time, with images to be integrated into their own ideal garden, but with few links to the gardening realities most people encounter (Gavin, 2003; Hedgecoe, 1997; Lacy, 1990; Pfahl, 2003).

The practical considerations faced by any gardener are as important as image in how a space will become a physical reality, in how the garden will appear on a relatively objective level and in how it ultimately fulfills, and to what degree, a gardeners expectations. The physical resources available to gardeners are central to the realization of gardens, but are often understated as factors in many horticultural articles, books and studies, particularly in glossy garden magazines and coffee table books. Many newer gardeners find difficulty in achieving compromise between their idealized garden and the resources that are necessary for achieving their goals, or their ideal gardens. Although gardeners hope the garden they create will match the image that guides them, at times the reality of their garden can lead to disappointment.

Motivations to garden are various and affect how people garden on several levels. The need to produce food is a strong reason to garden and primary for many people. Recreation, exercise, conformity to a sense of duty within a community, and aesthetics are also motivators. On a practical level motivation to garden influences the fundamental nature of a garden and how it becomes a physical reality together with the individuals image of their garden and the results they expect from it.

The influence of horticultural skills in gardening is always apparent in the garden but becomes increasingly obvious over the years. Experience allows easier translation of image to reality in a garden and will also affect the mental image a gardener has for a space. More experience and skill will automatically give advantage in narrowing the gap between the impossible and the ultimately feasible elements of ideal gardens. Skills and experience increases with time for interested gardeners.

Some people view gardening in the same way as others view housework, as a necessary chore, or another thing to use up weekend leisure time. Others find it relaxing or enjoyable and many consider it an artistic outlet, a wonderful recreation or even an all consuming passion. The

level of interest in gardening as an activity will obviously affect the ability to bring images of a garden to reality, and will fundamentally influence the perception of the physical garden and its future potential.

### **The Garden Shape and Character**

While acknowledging the primary function of imagination, image or dream, the place it is located is of immediate and fundamental importance in creating any garden. The space a garden occupies, its size, shape, relationship to building, surroundings, residence and its place within a community, will dictate how it can be used. Obviously, a 20 acre space with good land overlooking a lake will have different gardening results than a reclaimed 100 by 50 foot lot in a blighted urban neighborhood. The difference between a corner lot in an upper middle class neighborhood and a corner lot in a less established neighborhood, although not so immediately obvious are real constraints none the less.

The social context as well as purely physical elements can limit the potential of any garden. Among them may be the bylaws prohibiting grass above three inches and outlawing the use of any other ground cover plants in the front gardens of some wealthy neighborhoods, and a common understanding of fences being unacceptable, with the ancillary privacy and usage issues, in many middle class areas. The shape of the space and its relationship to surroundings and residence will affect how it can be designed as a garden. The ability to negotiate these relationships while still integrating an ideal image dictates the success of a garden on several levels.

Horticultural possibilities, including climatic conditions, existing plants, aspect shade and soil, are also factors which should strongly influence how a garden is planned and developed and will certainly affect the outcome and overall effect any garden has on its creators, users and observers. It is possible its recreate a classic English or Northern European garden in New York, but the climate in New York means that it will always be different than the original, with many almost dramatically inappropriate plants and an odd appearance in the higher harder light of the eastern United States

summer. A more difficult transition is for some New York immigrants who come from warmer tropical climates, since New York winters make it essential to learn a new palette of plants and new ways to garden with them. It can be exciting as well as challenging, but it is amazing to see that many people find ways to recreate the feelings and sense of their home gardens.

The mundane gardening observations of a sites aspect, its soil and all its growing conditions allow a sense of this place and one's dreams to interact in creative ways. The most successful gardens are usually those that are strongly personal to their creator yet look as though they always belonged in that place. Although only the best gardeners achieve it, most strive to achieve this balance.

As resources change over time, so can both the garden and the gardener's perception of his or her physical and even their ideal garden. The garden created by a busy young family will be considerable different from the one created by an older couple, with more free time and income and no more playing children. A garden in the same place can also change substantially over time since it is largely dependent on the gardener who cares for it. As life and family composition changes, gardening interest may increase or dissipate, and the skill of the gardener and knowledge of the garden can also grow over time. Thus the same garden can change substantially over time, as will the expectations and ideal image of it.

A gardener's income can have an obvious effect of the resulting garden. One of the primary functions of the garden, particularly for the lower income, was as an additional source of food (McNally, 1990). However, as incomes increase, gardens have tended to become more exclusively recreational and then ornamental. Food production for upper income gardeners tends to be for recreational rather than survival purposes. The primary influence of income is on the perception of the purpose of gardening, the ability to purchase supplies and plant material, and the availability of both time and labor.

Another factor which affects how people can garden is the availability of information, courses and plant materials. As leisure time has increased, so has an interest in recreational

horticulture and the availability of courses, television programs, magazines and books. Garden centers have become recreational destinations while there is a parallel increase in specialist plant suppliers in areas with rising incomes. These resources have enabled gardeners to become more sophisticated in the plants used and the designs of their gardens. Increased access to information also affects the gardens that people imagine.

### **Garden Expression and Interpretation**

The meaning of what a garden is can vary considerable. For some, it could mean a food producing area, while for others it would mean an ornamental garden. The same words can evoke considerable different visual images of what a garden is over time, between cultures and between individuals.

Initially, viewing a garden may be a visual experience, but there is more to it than meets the eye. Not all people will find the same meaning in a garden or landscape, for the emotional and intellectual reflexes provide the basis for an interpretation different from the visual act itself (Lewis, 1996). Even reactions to individual plants will differ, based on aesthetic preferences and emotional associations.

Within community garden in New York City, gardeners received essentially the same construction materials and plants. Their physical spaces were not essentially different, yet the gardens created varied substantially (O'Neill, 1994). The shape, style and usage of the garden would vary largely dependent upon where the gardeners came from, whether from a different region of the United States or another country. Even plants could have different names, use, meaning and value depending on the gardener and their image of the garden.

The usage of the gardens itself also varied dependent on the culture the lead gardener came from (O'Neill, 1997). In gardens that were primarily Latino, the first thing to be created was usually a casita, a built structure which supported social activities of the gardens. Community gardens with

primarily Asian gardeners were usually for food production, using vertical as well as horizontal space for plants. Gardens simply looked different, and were used differently.

In actuality, the functions of gardens are complex. The garden dreams realized and actualized can be in language that is symbolic, spatial, material and behavioral (Helphand, 1999). Gardens can be described in terms of the physical manipulation of nature, a representation of nature, or can be seen as enclosures of safe nature within bounded space (Otis, 2002). Similarly, ideas of nature and what is “natural” can come from strongly held feelings and beliefs which are highly personal and varied (Spirn, 1998). The perceived aesthetics of a natural environment is always contextual and reflects cultural influences (Berleant, 1992).

The assumption of a common language of landscape can often mislead people into assuming that images conjured by words will be the same for different people. However, the image a person has of their garden reflects their subjective perception of it, despite the objective reality of the place. This is because the perception of our physical environment always involves some amount of interpretation of the meaning inherent in the objects and environment itself (Neisser, 1976). As described by Anne Raver (1995),

“When my friend wanders by my garden on a perfect beach day, she sees the usual state of affairs. The peas are tumbling sloppily over their fence. The parsley still needs weeding. Something has completely eaten the carrots. That gorgeous purple perennial has stopped blooming... “That’s the cleome?” she says. “It looks like a weed.” I feel disappointed, for an instant, that she can’t see what I see. That she doesn’t have window into my Secret Garden. Where all the cleome is in bloom, perfect clusters of pink and white. But maybe that’s good, I think, as I go about, sinking these “weeds” into place. Because a garden is like the self. It has so many layers and winding paths, real or imagined, that it can never be known, completely, even by the most intimate of friends.” (p. 161)

## **Research Method**

In order to discover how the mental image of gardens becomes a physical reality we will conduct interviews with gardeners over time. A longitudinal approach is important since the mental ideal of the garden can vary over time, the work and resources the gardener puts into it can fluctuate, and the garden as a horticultural physical entity will change as it matures. The interviews will include

both a verbal and visual exploration of the gardener's image and actualization of their gardens through the use of a photographic elicitation method.

Since the focus of our research will be personal gardens, we will only interview amateur gardeners who do not hire professional garden designers. We will include both private gardens adjacent to residences, and also individual gardens found within community gardens. The interview will explore gardener's environmental history, and include their exposure to and experiences with gardens at both a personal and social level. Also examined will be their aesthetic preferences and cultural assumptions about what a garden 'should' be. What the garden means to them, and the level of attachment to the place will be assessed. The motivations for and patterns of use of the garden will also be explored, as will the resources the gardeners brought to bear on the creation of the garden.

The gardeners in the study will be asked to explain how they want their garden to look and we will specifically investigate the process by which the garden image is translated into reality. This will include describing the garden dream which guides them, and photographing what they have done so far, including what was and was not successful. They will also be asked to illustrate what they plan to do in the future. In addition to verbal descriptions, visual aids, including images of other gardens and plants may be utilized to assist respondents in explaining the desired garden.

For the photographic method, we will primarily utilize digital cameras. Both the interviewer and the gardeners will take photos to document the garden. However, when asked about the importance and image of the garden, the participant will be asked to photograph their garden themselves. Through the use of digital camera, the image will be immediately available on the digital display screen so the gardeners will be able to see and discuss the details of the photographic images while still on the site of their garden.

Photographs will be utilized to both document the garden itself and how it changes over time, as well as the meaning and significance of the garden to the gardener. More specifically, the visual images captured by photography will be able to translate the way a garden image reflects reality

more specifically than verbal descriptions alone. The use of a visual photographic elicitation method causes participants to focus on specific physical and aesthetic aspects of the garden. In previous research, Rae (2001) has applied this photo method to understand participant meaning of Swedish allotment gardens and cottages in Stockholm, and of housing renovations and home ownership in New York City (Rae, 1997). In both studies, the use of participant photography brought out detailed visual information which uniquely contributed to the findings.

Research that utilizes photo elicitation interviews elicits not only more information, but also a different kind of information (Harper, 2002). This can include feelings and memories, as well as specifically aesthetic aspects of the object of the photograph. As stated by Prosser and Schwartz (1998),

“Through our use of photographs we can discover and demonstrate relationships that may be subtle or easily overlooked. We can communicate the feeling or suggest the emotion imparted by activities, environments, and interactions. And we can provide a degree of tangible detail, a sense of being there and a way of knowing that may not readily translate into other symbolic modes of communication.”(p. 116).

The visible features of a space add a dimension to the understanding of a place, and the data captured by a photograph is qualitatively different from those recorded through other research methods. Image based methodologies use visual information to make theoretical arguments instead of being simply illustrative (Emmison and Smith, 2000).

The visual images available through photography can represent both how people express themselves at an aesthetic and functional level, and how they perceive that expression. Photo elicitation methods can be used to examine environmental identity in a variety of different places and settings. Although people’s degree of attachment to gardens can vary individually, and change over time and with cultural differences, the growing of a garden reflects a sense of identity and attachment. Photographic images are a way to explore environmental identity, which can depict both how people’s identity is expressed in and reflected by their physical environment.

An investigation of participant meaning and mental images, through the taking and interpretation of photographic images, will explore personal and cultural differences. The use of a

longitudinal methodology, which incorporates photographs to show actual changes over time at both a physical and experiential level, will be particularly revealing with gardens which are continuously in transition. A visual method can help us to better understand how people's mental images connect to their physical environments, and to assist in the development of theoretical perspectives through the insights they offer.

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