

Future Gardens: Re-enchantment of the Garden as a Place of Hope

By Helen Armstrong, 2004

One has to wonder who will have gardens in the future. If the major cities in Australia continue to absorb people at the current rate and if politicians and urban planners stick to the urban footprints on their new plans, there will only be room for courtyards and balconies.

Sweeping planning proposals have implications in the fine grain of our cities. No planner would dare to repeat the open space wastelands around the high-rise towers of the 1960s, so what will our parklands look like and will there be space for private gardens as we know them? Perhaps not! But it would seem humans are compelled to garden, so what can be done?

FutureGardens, in the fine tradition of installation art, is a composition of gestures that start the conversation about new forms of 'garden' in cities of the 21st century. Each is a statement about re-enchantment with the garden; statements that explore an ethic of care and environmental healing and encourage us to move forward from the cynicism engendered by post-modern disillusionment. They are small gestures of hope.

Much has been written about 'hope' recently. The anthropologist, Michael Taussig suggests that 'hope' lies in the little optimistic gestures we make as we go about our everyday lives. In the face of so much pessimism about our environment, these garden gestures are heroic.

The French feminist, Julia Kristeva, calls 'hope' a joyful revolt. She suggests that the state of being hopeful is a kind of joyfulness that comes about through remembered treasured moments and by us having the best possible relationship with our environment. *FutureGardens* exemplify 'joyful revolt' while at the same time, exploring deeper issues of care for the environment and poetic connectedness.

The eight gardens in the Sydney Botanic Gardens, on the site of the original, though fearfully temporary, Garden Palace, foreshadow the temporality of our Aussie backyard – either done over by TV garden shows or disappearing under the new urban densities. They urge us to address the placelessness generated by Late Capitalism consumerism and the wilful neglect of our air quality and resulting climate change.

FutureGardens are the result of the hard work of a small group of people led by Penny Allen, Steve Hammond and behind the scenes, the Government Architect Chris Johnson and the generosity of Sydney Botanic Gardens. The *FutureGardens* project is one of the series of events organised under the umbrella of the Year of the Built Environment. While the crowds attending YBE City Talks in the Sydney Town Hall have listened to big picture planning and new urban designs for mega-cities, and people have queued to look at Future Houses, little garden gestures have sprung up on the ridge defining East Circular Quay suggesting new forms of garden for our crowded, thirsty cities.

Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*, published in 1977, so certain and fundamental for two decades, now seems like distant dreaming. Way back in the late 1970s he said that every house should have a garden and that every garden should have a seat where a person can be in touch with nature – '...a quiet place for an intense kind of solitude' (Alexander:817). He also said in healthy towns, families can grow vegetables, not as a hobby but as a fundamental part of human life (Alexander,1977). So how will our future cities accommodate these needs?

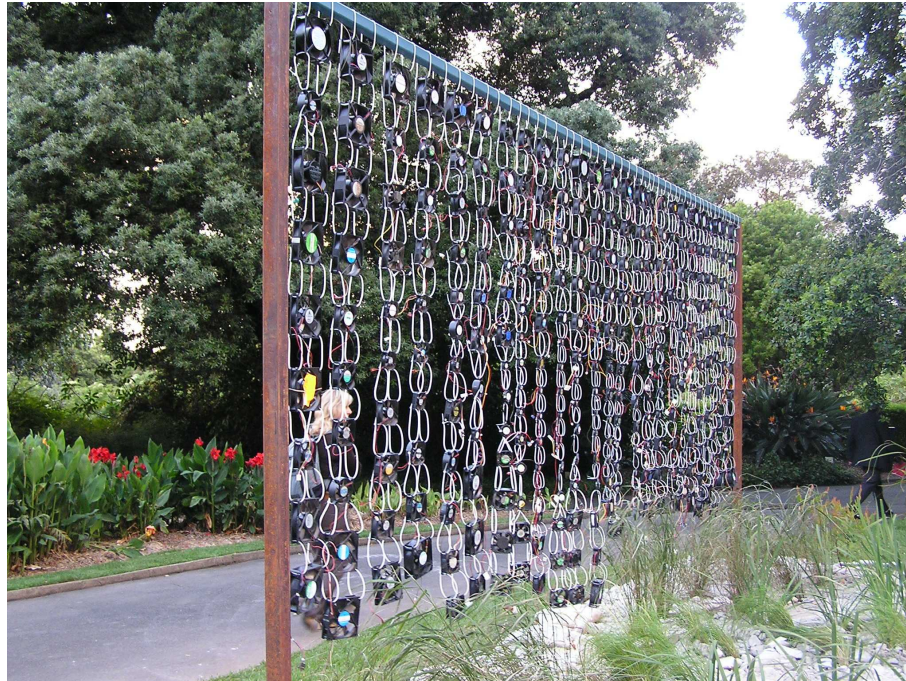
An intense kind of solitude is possible in *The Anti-Garden* by 360°. This is an elegant place of repose that suggests roads will be a thing of the past in the cities of the future. Former road materials -old concrete, road gravel and bitumen - have been re-used to make a graceful, sinuous low dry 'stone' wall that encloses a small sanctuary with fruiting pears and a hovering deck, held down by a simple wall-seat. The 360° designers have long been intrigued by the little ecosystems that exist in the decaying parts of the city. With this in mind, they drove around the city in a 'ute' with a few spades, collecting weeds for their walls in order to alert us to the special beauty of these sites. And they have.



The Anti-Garden by 360°

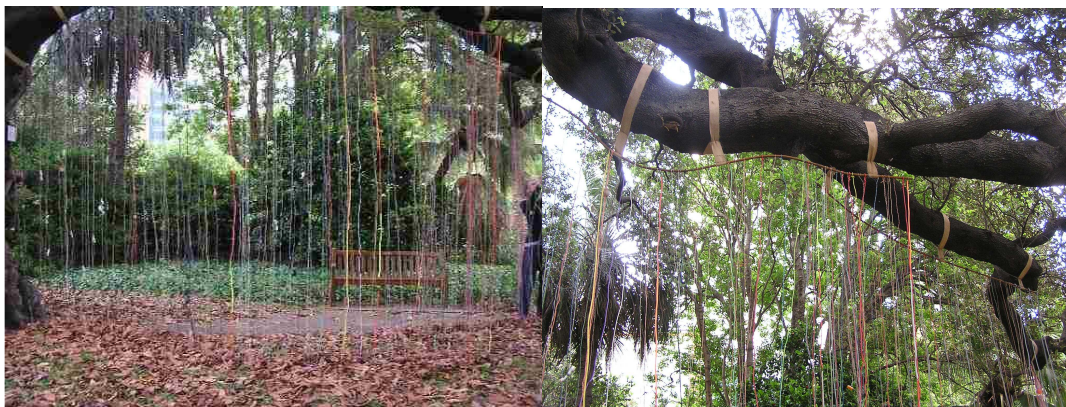
Retrofit Garden by Annabel and Catriona Stanton is an equally intriguing gesture in black and white with just a hint of green. The concept of both the arid interior and the immediate sandstone ridge, now precariously perforated, are simulated by a rectangle of crushed sandstone from one of these underground tunnels. Wild plants, propagated from indigenous seed, and low reclining seats, woven from old black irrigation hose, evoke another kind of beauty – a 'Mad Max' quality - that may be more common in the future. But the garden could equally be a rooftop courtyard quirkily revealing the view through an intricate screen made of discarded computer fans. If you squint you could be looking at a rakish Jacques Tati 1960's modern garden. This is a deeply reflective, humorous, and poetic piece, as is Jane Irwin and Bill Royal's *Woven Place*.





Retrofit Garden by Annabel and Catriona Stanton

Strongly influenced by the annual Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire, Irwin and Royal have explored how beautiful spaces can be formed by gently adding to what has already grown. Reworking lengths of discarded wire from a variety of sources, whimsical screens are defined by long arching branches of an old Moreton Bay fig. They suggest that sustainable designs do not necessarily have to be high-tec and they challenge the way our spaces are increasingly determined by 'risk management'. Instead serendipity and spontaneity have fashioned the spaces of this garden which is personalised by tiny artefacts woven into the curtains of pastel-coloured wire. The fragility of the installation speaks poetically to the solidity of the figs, however even these giants are vulnerable to risk management imperialism, often associated with the needs of the car.



Woven Place by Jane Irwin and Bill Royal

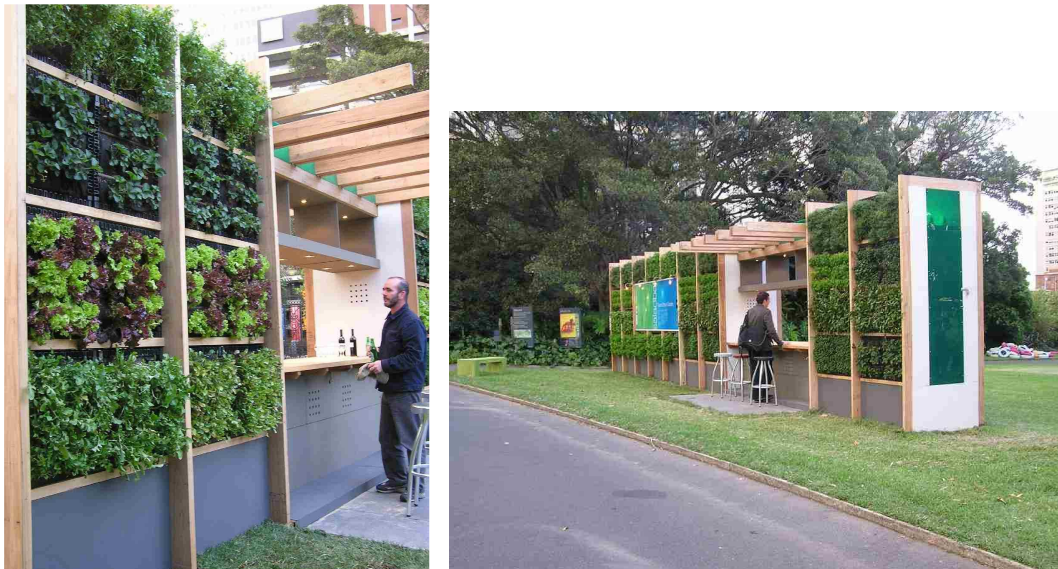
Despite this, a future without cars still seems untenable. Aspect's garden, *Carpark*, suggests future green urban space as undulating green waves, with cars snugly tucked underneath; a neat idea but somewhat abrasive to the particular car on display. No matter, Maya Lin can acknowledge new competition as sine

waves of water-recycling grasslands blanket our cars. Although immediately humorous, this installation, layered in fact and layered in meaning, suggests that many contemporary landscape projects are derived from the needs of the car, often resulting in shallow and deceptive artificial surfaces. Aspect designers have revealed such hidden engineering profiles to remind us that for all our rhetoric about rootedness, we more often than not are dealing merely with skin.



Carpark by Aspect

Lack of space and increased residential densities are also addressed in *Salad Bar* by TurfDesign Studio. This vertical garden can fit on most balconies or on podia over car-parks. Seated at a bar in the centre of a wall of lettuce, strawberries and other delicious greens, one can eat and drink the fruits of one's labour. This clever cleanser of grey-water can either separate or act as a meeting place for neighbours in the new minimalist apartments – the ultimate environmentally-friendly fashion accessory.



Salad Bar by TurfDesign Studio

The slim, minimal Salad Bar for apartment living contrasts with Ambient Landscapes' *Built To Sustain* garden, with its earnest message about affordability. This garden is similarly intended to deal with shared space. Built of recycled timbers and galvanised iron, four rooves, at significant locations outside a circle within a square, capture dew – seven litres a night - accumulating in four Aladdin urns which overflow into

an underground storage tank. Unlike the gardens for possible high-rise living, this is a garden for new denser suburbs on the city edge. It accommodates communal living and can even act as a reservoir when bushfires menace.



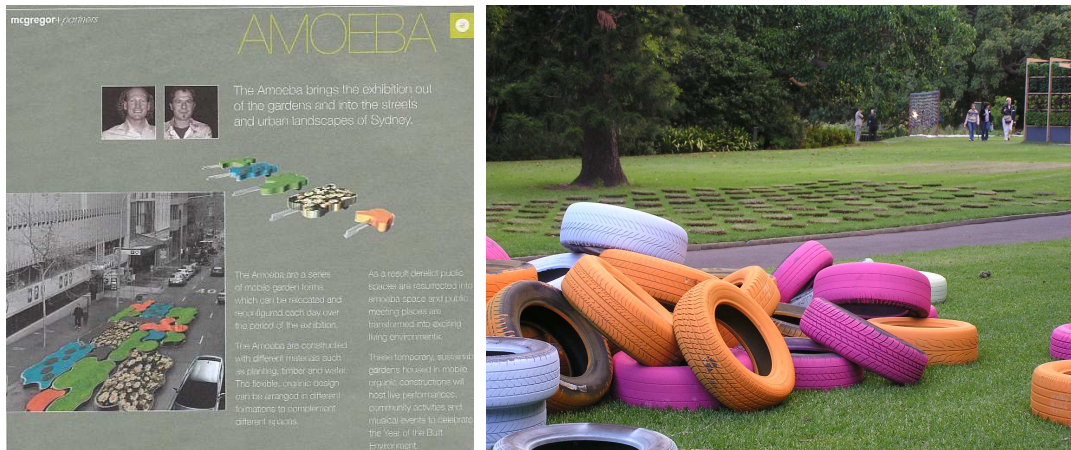
Ambient Landscapes' *Built To Sustain*

Body Mind and Soul by EDAWgillespies is about lifestyle, lifestyle, lifestyle. The three gardens present a package of lifestyle options; a Zen mediation platform in a space cooled by water tower, softly lit, while eating the products of a bright yellow hydrated garden. Mainly made of recycled materials and capturing grey water, the three components – mindful body gardens with a touch of soul - can be used together or apart depending on space and synergy.



Body Mind and Soul by EDAWgillespies

Synergy with space is the focus of *Amoeba* by mcgregor+partners. This mutable garden is a jigsaw of moveable shapes permeating into urban space in configurations that can vary with whim and circumstance. This is *FutureGarden* as performance space – performing people competing with colourful plants. But there is more to the performance. At the centre of each of the garden units, made from a new soil technology 'Stratum Green' (100% shredded tyres), is a disused garden sprinkler. In the spirit of other reform organisations associated with unrestrained liquid consumption, each has been donated by former water profligate gardeners who, seeing the error of their ways, have pledged to use less water generally but particularly in their gardens.



Amoeba by mgregor+partners

While the collection of gardens is a gesture to a better future, there is a much more hopeful and already-existing reality and that is the growing number of enterprises associated with recycling, environmental materials, seed-saving and so on, that one can see in the list of sponsors on the website. The sponsorship was a bountiful harvest in many ways and one hopes the website receives continuing visits from a wide range of people.

FutureGardens also nurtured a healthy crop of collaborations ranging from the strong support of the Botanic Gardens, to Australand's project management, to the collaboration between and within the designer teams.

The collection of gardens is full of hope. They are a joyful revolt, both whimsical and serious. They all assume that we will have limited space in the future. They all attempt to harness every drop of moisture in the air. They are creatively engaged with recycled materials and many assume growing our own food will still be fundamental. Some are gregarious spaces while others allow for an intense kind of solitude. The underlying tenet in all is sustainability - the many facets of sustainability - and, in the Year of The Built Environment, these gardens suggest that gardens of the future will be firmly rooted in the emerging urban forms of *FutureCities*.

