

## CHAPTER ONE: THE GARDEN AS AN EXPRESSION OF MIGRATION

Migration is part of the cultural experience of all non-Aboriginal Australians, whether it occurred four or five generations ago or even earlier with the first European arrivals or whether it is the relatively recent experience of migration associated with the post World War II migration program which has continued in various forms up to the present.

The pervasive phenomenon of migration in Australia has resulted in complex feelings about places where Australians experience where they live both as insiders and as outsiders. Australians tend to carry dual values which acknowledge a heritage from somewhere else, no matter how far back in time, together with a strong sense of being Australian and, in this divided state, there appears to be a constant balancing of values derived from one's cross cultural identity.

With the recent interest in cultural diversity in Australia, there has been a growing recognition of the value of intangible heritage - the heritage which lies in cultural practice and ways of life. Migrant gardens are an aspect of this intangible heritage. They are frequently unselfconscious expressions of the complex way people relate to places - the new place and the old place. A meaningful way to understand such individualistic expressions is to engage in the stories of the migrant experience in order to unravel how this is expressed in the garden.

The modern metropolitan figure is the migrant. Migrants create the new metropolitan aesthetics and life styles, re-inventing private and public places. It is the fluid nature of late 20<sup>th</sup> century cities which enables us to enter the localities of different everyday worlds with their intriguing and sometimes disturbing difference. In these cities we can find the gendered city, the city of ethnicities, the territories of different social groups, and the shifting centres and peripheries. These are the cities of fixed objects of design -the architecture, the civic gardens, commerce, urban planning - and yet they are simultaneously plastic and changeable. They are sites of transitory events, movements and memories. They are therefore significant spaces in which to understand the migrants' garden.

This chapter introduces the complexity associated with the notion of migration and discusses the significance of the garden in the migration experience. Abstract metaphors are counterpoised against humble descriptions of everyday activities in the garden in an attempt to give value to the vernacular garden by the very simplicity of the garden descriptions.

### *The Experience of Migration*

The concept of migration is one of uncertainty and change where boundaries blur and the sense of a single truth comes into question. At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, images of migrating people dominate the media, forcing all of us to confront the stranger within us and the power of transformation. The garden, as a vehicle for such profound change, is an expression of what is familiar but it also has the power to reveal the unknown within all of us.

The generic terms, 'migration' and 'the migrant', tend to mask the intricate history of migration in Australia as well as the complexity of reasons why migrants leave their

home country. The reasons why people migrate can range from a simple reflection of the tradition of migratory work to the chaotic displacement associated with war and famine. Many Italian migrants in Australia were following the tradition of migratory work where men seasonally migrated across borders to follow seasonal work, albeit involving much greater distance and longer stays. This was also true of the Chinese when they came to Australia in the last century. The gardens of such groups tend to follow the traditional patterns of using the garden to grow provisions for the family and the market.

Other migrants were forced to flee their countries due to war, such as the refugees from war-torn Europe in the 1940s, Lebanon in the 1970s, Vietnam in the late 1970s and Eastern Europe and Africa in the late 1990s. Other migrants left repressive political regimes, such as post war communism and the more recent problems in South America. Migrants who were refugees believed that they would never be able to return to their countries, so the garden took on a particular poignancy as a place to re-establish order after chaos, a place to experience the healing power of the seasons and a place to give expression to cherished aspects of the lost homeland. The Vietnamese and Croatian gardens described in this book are such places.

Other migrants sought adventure and a new life in a different and possibly exotic place. This was true of some British migrants and many Scandinavians as well as individual migrants from a range of countries. The gardens of those seeking adventure often reflect an interest in Australian plants and horticultural experiments. Rose-Marie's French garden in Brisbane described in Chapter Nine shows how her garden was a continual adventure with plants. Other migrants came to the new world for religious reasons, seeking to establish utopian settlements, such as the German migrants in the last century and Italian groups in North Queensland. The collective nature of utopian settlements is also reflected in their gardens.

The migrant experience after arriving in Australia tends to follow a certain sequence. There is the initial grief over a lost place, particularly for the refugees, then there is a recognition of the value of their specific migrant community within Australia, especially the extended family and the cultural practices that have been transposed. In a paradoxical way it is the very sharing of memories in the extended family and in the migrant community which helps the migrant to accept the new country. Creating a garden is an early stage of the process of such acceptance. It provides a way for the migrant to start to make the unfamiliar feel familiar, but it also does much more. Creating a garden helps assuage the experiences of war and repression. There is a strong healing process in recreating a natural order, in responding to seasons, and in producing food. Once the unfamiliar begins to assume aspects of the home country, then the migrant can selectively assimilate those aspects of the host culture which are appealing. Often, however, the process of assimilation is unconscious and it is this unselfconscious hybridisation which results in the most intriguing aspects of migration. The Latvian gardens at Amity Point, Queensland have unselfconsciously assimilated much of the tropical Queensland garden practice.

As much as there is a sense of loss in the experience of migration, there is also a sense of adventure. Migrants who come from non-Anglophone cultures frequently exhibit a pioneering spirit towards the new country and are often imbued with an enterprising ethos with its associated hard work. The gardens of this group represent the physical

labour associated with a productive garden but they also reveal the gardeners' willingness to experiment with new plants and to adapt their traditional garden practices to different soils and climates. Some of the Vietnamese gardens in Sydney showed this adventurous spirit. Similarly, the Greek gardens show highly ingenious ways of adapting Greek traditions to Australian gardens. Meanwhile those migrants who came from England, Ireland and Scotland had a different attitude towards Australia as a place. While there was clearly a desire to recreate the beauty of the British garden, particularly in the selection of plants, there was not the same need to sustain different cultural practices because the culture appeared to be so similar. Instead for many British migrants, the garden became a place to carry out horticultural experiments so characteristic of the 'potting shed' tradition of the British middle class garden in the last century.

### *Contemporary Reflections on Cross Cultural Gardens*

Contemporary gardens have not only been the subject of study for garden designers, there has also been increasing interest by landscape academics and human geographers in the vernacular garden and its meaning for people. At the same time, the role of community gardens has become a focus of study, particularly the ways in which different cultural practices are expressed in these gardens. More recently the growing issue of the homeless in modern cities has prompted a study of their transitory gardens.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally gardens have been studied in terms of their spaces and their plants, with some great gardens also being studied for their symbolism and the allegory embedded in their form.<sup>2</sup> Specific contemporary garden studies, in contrast, tend to be special gardens studied for the ways in which they embody a certain design ethos either as reflection of the broader design culture, including art and architecture, or as the expression of an individual designer.

There is, however, another dimension to contemporary gardens which involves the recognition of the importance of vernacular gardens and the way they contribute to the tapestry of towns and cities. A study of such gardens is enriched by a study of their meanings. Migrant gardens are heavily imbued with meanings for their gardeners, much of which is not understood by the wider community or even the migrants themselves

Sam Bass Warner, an exponent of the value of community gardens in North America, writes in *To Dwell is to Garden*,<sup>3</sup> of Heidegger's observation that the word 'to dwell' fuse two older words which had two distinct meanings: both to build and to cultivate land. Bass Warner explores the depth of human meaning involved in carrying out every day tasks, considered within the framework of people seeking food, land and re-instating their identity. He suggests that it is the results of these tasks which give the subtle quality evident in the fabric of cities.

Bass Warner observed the multiple meanings of every day tasks undertaken on the vacant lots in Boston. In Australia, one can see similar multiple meanings being expressed in many private migrant gardens through the simple tasks of growing food. This re-establishes a particular cultural relationship experienced through the cultivation of land. As an historian, Bass Warner recognises that the small individual gardens within the larger community gardens contain the history of the gardener's

people. He speculates that if one knew the history of the different vegetables, their history would tell of the migration of people across the world as well as revealing the nature of their gardening exchanges with each other.

*To Dwell is to Garden* focusses on the vital role community gardens play for migrants in North American cities. Migrants traditionally have started their lives in the new country in cheap accommodation which, in the cities of United States, has been inner city tenements and large public housing apartment blocks. This has meant that gardening on communal blocks has been the only way migrants could express their need to garden. In Australian cities, migrants have been able to live in houses, although often shared with other families. As a result the Australian migrant garden has been an expression of an individual or the family rather than the community.

Although there are differences between the migrant gardens in North America and Australia, there are also similarities. The traditions embedded in the African-American gardens have been documented in Richard Westmacott's study, *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*.<sup>4</sup> These gardens provide a rich history about the African-American experience. These gardens also exhibit the ways self-sufficiency, independence and resourcefulness are valued. Westmacott describes how

*Many of the symbols of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness in these gardens may be seen as backward or even ugly by the casual observer - for instance, piles of disused materials awaiting re-use, and animal pens and shelters...but in a self-sufficient system, chickens and pigs mean more than eggs and bacon. They are symbolic of an integrated system where scraps and crop residues are turned into manure and returned to the land. To a gardener a manure heap is a source of satisfaction, symbolic of fertility and growth.*<sup>5</sup>

Many of the gardens in this book are examples of such self sufficiency which is often seen as untidy. In Australia however, it was the private garden rather than community gardens which became the vehicle for such self-sufficiency traditions. In the 1950s, migrants were subjected to the policy of 'Assimilationism'<sup>6</sup> which meant that all migrants were to become 'New Australians' and were to relinquish practices associated with their former culture. Such policies meant that Australian gardens should look Australian. So it was only in the back garden that migrants felt free to carry out their cultural practices.

#### *Hybridity: Altered Garden Languages*

One vital phenomenon in New World places is the way in which migrants and the host community learn from each other. It is here that the commonplace and apparently homogeneous cultures can reveal more complex stories and ways of making sense. This involves observing frequently overlooked activities that are hidden away within the label of the mundane. For example, Bass Warner comments on such ordinary things as how the Italian use of basil has now been adopted by Americans and how corn now appears in Boston Chinese dishes. These are subtle indicators of changes in cultural practices and are indicators of a developing hybridity. In Sydney, the Lebanese community have changed some of their culinary

practices because of the influence of the Indian migrant community whose food shops happen to be located near the Lebanese food shops. Such apparently mundane changes are also evident in the garden, however, many of the migrants of the 1950s were just as unwilling to embrace change as the Australians. The grandson of an Italian migrant family in Sydney comments with amusement, that his grandparents would not eat the fruit from a prolific passion-fruit vine they inherited in their first Australian garden. In these apparently simple observations lie the clues to the blurred boundaries and the fixed boundaries of the migration experience.

### *The Migrant Garden as Cultural Object*

Other reflections on contemporary gardens provide different insights about the migrant garden. John Dixon Hunt's essay 'The Garden as a Cultural Object' contained in the study edited by Wrede and Adams on *Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century: Denatured Visions*<sup>7</sup> explores the notion of 'invented traditions' and the concept of a 'third nature'.

He explains this concept by referring to the American poet, Wallace Steven, whose poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' describes placing a small artwork, a jar, upon a hillside in a Tennessee wilderness; an act which alters both the jar and the wild landscape. He suggests that gardens too are jars set down in otherwise untouched landscapes and that part of their interest is that they alter their surroundings by their presence. In order to convey how a juxtaposition of elements changes the way we see things, Dixon Hunt suggests that the garden achieves this by changing the way we see what is beyond the garden and what is beyond the garden changes the way we perceive the garden. Although Dixon Hunt is referring to the great gardens of Britain which were in many cases created within wild forests, such a concept is equally applicable to a migrant garden within the city.

For many migrants, the new country is often seen as a cultural wilderness and thus a garden placed in this wilderness is a mutually altering phenomenon. In Australia in the 1950s, the migrant garden was a hidden place. It was not until the 1970s when cultural difference started to be accepted in Australia that the migrant garden, the work of art, was a visible presence within the urban landscape.

Dixon Hunt describes the garden as a '*hugely inclusive realm*'<sup>8</sup> where '*perhaps nowhere else in human technology or art [are concentrated] a whole cluster of ideas and aspirations, some conscious and declared, others no less apparent for being unconscious.*' In a desire to understand migrant gardens, it is the ideas, the aspirations, the conscious and the unconscious acts that need to be teased out, because embedded in these expressions of beliefs and values is also the phenomenon of '*invented traditions*'<sup>9</sup>. Dixon Hunt suggests that from the very earliest examples, gardens have been '*invented traditions*' and that some of the most conspicuous examples of invented garden traditions have occurred when societies have been undergoing rapid transformation, in other words when traditions have been interrupted. He indicates that in this period of change, gardens are often created to provide symbolic spaces which seek to imply a continuity with a past. '*Invented traditions*' are evident in many migrant gardens, initially as response to sudden change and later as a response to the gradual change brought about by increased material wealth. Chapter Two describes the Italian garden in Australia which

provides an interesting example of this phenomenon through the intergenerational changes in the gardens of one Italian family.

#### *The Migrant Garden as an Ephemeral Gardens*

Yet another dimension to the migrant garden is brought out in Balmori and Morton's book, *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*.<sup>10</sup> This is a study of the gardens of the homeless in large American cities. The authors explore the collections of junk which make up such gardens and ask why these gardens exist. They suggest that such ephemeral gardens indicate the essential human need to garden. The gardens of the homeless and the gardens created by migrants reflect people's need to transform their environment so that it helps sustain them emotionally. Balmori and Morton suggest that more than any other art, the garden is '*positioned in impermanence*'.<sup>11</sup> The migrant garden is an ephemeral phenomenon, frequently only lasting as long as the migrant gardener. This is not true of all migrant gardens, however, as evidenced by the Chinese market gardens in Australia which have been handed on from one generation to the next. There are some Chinese market gardens in large Australian cities which were established in the 1870s and are still operating.

Both the Chinese market gardens and Italian domestic gardens are examples of intergenerational gardens. In Australia, the Chinese market gardens provisioned the whole of the east coast of Australia in the second half of the last century. They have played an important role in Australian history. It is therefore intriguing to find that some of these gardens still exist in the major Australian cities. The Chinese market gardens are economic enterprises and they appear to have withstood the impact of increasing suburban development, unlike the Italian, Croatian and Maltese market gardens, most of which have been lost.

Examples of both ephemeral and long lasting, intergenerational gardens indicate the diversity of reasons for migrant gardens in Australia. Despite the length of the Chinese gardens, some migrant gardens only last a few generations. The traditions become diluted and change. This is particularly true of the 1990s when Australian supermarkets have the same foods as were in the gardens of the home country, thus removing the need to grow food.

#### *Summary*

There are many interesting stories about migrant gardens in Australia. The Vietnamese garden, the Croatian garden, the Portuguese garden, to name a few, are all intriguingly different. It is clear that these gardens are rich in cultural meanings, both in the ways they are used and in the plants within them. Less clearly, there are unconscious expressions of migration in the garden, including '*invented traditions*' from a revised past. The presence of these gardens in Australian cities is mutually altering. They talk to the stranger within us all, however, they will not last. They are ephemeral cultural expressions and perhaps all we can do is catch their fleeting stories and attempt to understand the depth of their meaning.

Migrant gardens are a gift to the culture of Australian cities. Such modest common place expressions of ordinary people are part of the on-going historical process in which people, their plants and the way they are grown and used are in continual change.

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## Endnotes

1. Balmori, D. & Morton, M.1993. *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
2. The great British gardens of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were often designed around a classical allegory.
3. Bass Warner Jr, S.1987. *To Dwell is to Garden*. Northeastern University Press: USA.
4. Westmacott, R. 1992. *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*. University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville.
5. Ibid. 92.
6. Assimilationism was developed as a policy by Arthur Caldwell, the founder of the post war migration program. It was used to placate the Anglophone Australians who were afraid of difference.
7. Dixon Hunt, J. 1991. 'The Garden as Cultural Object' in Wrede, S. & Adams,W. (eds). *Denatured Visions: Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. The Museum of Modern Art publ: NY.
8. Ibid. 30.
9. Ibid. 20.
10. Balmori, D. & Morton, M.1993. *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
11. Ibid. 1.