

DESIGN, INTENT AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF ALLAN GARDENS

by Matthew Cowley

Toronto, Canada's most populous urban centre, is home to millions of people from all over the world. First established as a city in 1834, the lands downtown that were once muddy ports and trading posts are now overshadowed by such architectural giants as the CN tower, the Toronto-Dominion Centre and SkyDome. While these structures are some of the most memorable shapes on the city's skyline, Toronto is also known for its green spaces, including an extensive ravine system, large urban parks and recreational refuges such as Centre Island. In fact, the City of Toronto officially operates 1500 parks, equivalent to approximately 8000 hectares of land (City of Toronto 2003) - a feature enjoyed by countless people and often noted as one of the nicer benefits of living in this ever-growing city. Over 130 years ago, when cities like New York were a fraction of their current size, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead - who designed that city's famous Central Park - raised notable concern for the "highly corrupt and irritating matters" entering the lungs of city dwellers, and fervently advocated for the provision of spaces for trees and parks in growing cities (Olmstead 1996: 338). He asked his audience, "Is it doubtful that it does men good to come together this way in pure air and under the light of heaven, or that it must have an influence directly counteractive to that of the ordinary hard, hustling working hours of town life?"

The idyllic setting Olmstead so eloquently describes may sound whimsical today but his appreciation for public parks is perhaps not so different from what many people still value about such spaces in our cities: an area of land, be it large or small, that offers refuge and space for relaxation in the midst of concrete and steel.

Indeed, it is not just the altitudinal and spatial contrast from multi-storied structures that make parks so appealing, for if we wish to differentiate such spaces from empty parking lots for example, we must also consider that for a many city dweller, public parks can offer them their most common and tangible encounters with what many of us refer to as 'nature'. Trees, shrubs, grass, flowers, birds, squirrels, and streams drawn together in one place represent pieces of the natural world and a particular, attractive aesthetic. And while it is not strange to think about parks as places where one can find elements of nature, we must not forget that even the large, lush areas of places like Toronto's High Park are, to a certain extent, designed spaces, and not entirely 'natural' or left to grow wild. Human hands help map out urban parks, and human hands help manage and maintain them. Of course, this may seem obvious - everyone has seen grass being cut and flower beds being manicured by park staff. But beyond this, it is less likely that we regularly consider what the original design and intent of an urban park may have been and how the 'nature' of the park and its site may have changed and evolved over time with different users of that space. Parks exist in a physical context, but they also exist in a broader social and environmental context. As such, what is the relationship between changes in the overall environment of the city and the ways in which we see and interact with certain parks? How do the things we value in urban areas and in nature intersect in such spaces? What is the signifi-

cance of public parks amongst increasingly private or pseudo-public spaces in cities?

Allan Gardens is arguably one of Toronto's best known park areas, and its history, design and place in the city provide an especially interesting response to the above questions. Situated between Gerrard, Carlton, Jarvis and Sherbourne Streets, this historic spot is nestled in a relatively dense downtown neighbourhood, just west of the older residential areas that hug the edge of the Don Valley, and just east of the bustle of Yonge Street, College Park (which is not really a park, but a large office and retail building) and Maple Leaf Gardens (which is known for hockey, not maples). While the site's shape and form have been mostly unchanged for several decades, the land and buildings at Allan Gardens went through a period of substantial growth and development in its early years, and each physical change reflects the social and spatial desires of the park's upper-class associates.

In 1860, a five-acre oval parcel of land (roughly the centre portion of the current park) was given by deed to the Toronto Horticultural Society by the Honourable George William Allan for the purpose of developing a botanical garden. Allan was the wealthy son of Scottish immigrants who was, among other things, the 11th mayor of Toronto, an elected speaker of the Canadian Senate, President of the Toronto Horticultural Society for twenty-five years, and the first president of the Toronto Conservatory of Music (Allan Gardens Conservatory 1999b). At that time, The Toronto Horticultural Society was composed primarily of horticulturalists and practitioners from the elite of society (including several senior politicians of Upper Canada's government) as well as other 'practical' or amateur members whose endorsement and final acceptance was at the discretion of senior members of the Society (Allan Gardens Conservatory 1999a).

The creation by the city's wealthy and influential upper-class of something as outwardly plain as a park was not uncommon at the time. As Michael Hough has said (echoing Olmstead, above), the industrial revolution and the growth of cities changed the way many people related to open spaces:

The psychological and physical separation between urban and rural environments widened as cities grew larger, more industrialised and more remote from the rural areas with which they had originally been connected. The urban park had an entirely different purpose from the countryside it replaced. The crops, orchards and livestock that had originally been the function of many open spaces in the pre-industrial settlements were now replaced by open spaces that catered exclusively to amenity and recreation. (Hough 1984: 14)

Furthermore, the creation of parks like Allan Gardens was inspired by a "preoccupation with the aesthetics of natural landscape" at that

time (Hough 1984: 15). Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Allan Gardens grew in size as more surrounding lands were acquired from Allan and the City, and the Gardens began to be known as a place where residents of the then-wealthy surrounding neighbourhoods could even enjoy a classical music concert on a warm weekend afternoon. Yet even as the site began to grow larger and more popular, Allan and the City agreed that the entire grounds were always to remain publicly accessible and free of charge (Allan Gardens Conservatory 1999a). This is noteworthy when we consider the types of people the Horticultural Society was hoping to attract and the types of people they were hoping not to attract. From these beginnings came what was to be essentially Toronto's first civic park, but the site

was completed in 1910 (Allan Gardens Conservatory 1999a). Like the pavilion that it replaced, the Palm House drew on architectural traditions combined with the trend of classical design elements using materials of the day - wood, iron, glass, brick and masonry. It was in part a tribute to the Crystal Palace, but more significantly it represented a miniature version of the massive Palm House at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in England (completed in 1848). The Palm House still stands today and is the centrepiece both of the grounds of Allan Gardens and of the four conservatory greenhouses (the last of which was added in 1957) which branch off it in a U-shaped pattern. Together, these structures contain thousands of exotic plants from all over the world, many of which would not sur-



Matthew Cowley, *Echinocactus grusonii*, "Golden Barrel Cactus", from Mexico, digital photo

would see more grand design and changes as a part of the public realm before existing as we know it today.

Despite the popularity of this grand site (or perhaps, because of it), debts forced The Horticultural Society to sell the lands and holdings to the City of Toronto in 1888, maintaining the original terms of Allan's lease which was that the Gardens always be open to the public. As new owners, the City for the most part maintained the look and feel of what The Horticultural Society had built up, but in 1902 a disastrous fire destroyed the famous pavilion and most of the conservatory, leaving a vast structural vacancy that was not replaced until construction on the Robert McCallum-designed Palm House

would see more grand design and changes as a part of the public realm before existing as we know it today.

It may seem ironic that the function of the conservatory is to protect nature from nature. This, after all, is why the structure is called a conservatory - cacti, orchids and ferns coinhabit a sort of living bubble that, while bursting with life (i.e., nature) on the inside, is not necessarily a natural arrangement existing in a natural environment. To consider one comparison, after meditating upon the carefully planned circular Aldrich Park on the campus of the University of California at Irvine, William Cronon observed that,

its symbolic role on the campus is to offer a representation of nature - pastoral, parklike, Edenic - at the heart of the university... By examining where all these trees come from, and by thinking of the vast amount of human labor that has gone into rearranging this landscape, you will begin to understand just how artificial this natural green space really is. (Cronon 1996: 52-53)

But artificial or not, nature (or at least, a certain construction of nature) at Allan Gardens is being conserved and displayed in a particular way, and the setting offered by McCallum's buildings still holds a strong appeal for visitors to the park. Can we evaluate in some way the artificial/natural status of the conservatory? One way to try to answer this is from an ecological point of view. In an attempt to untangle "the mess we have made with of our neighbourhoods, cities, and ecosystems," Van der Ryn and Cowan have called on designers to consider the natural world in their work and to practice ecological design, which they define as "any form of design that minimizes environmentally destructive impacts by integrating itself with living processes" (Van de Ryn and Cowan 1996: 17-18). The case could be made that the Palm House fits this definition, but it is unlikely that "minimizing environmentally destructive impacts" was foremost in the minds of McCallum and The Horticultural Society. In contrast to a further stipulation of Van der Ryn and Cowan's about not being bound to a particular method and profession, the Palm House represents a style, and despite its integration with living processes (indeed, the building is teeming with them), it is closer to what Hough would distinguish as a "nurtured 'pedigreed' landscape" dependent on energy inputs and horticultural technology to assist its natural cycles (Hough 1984: 6).

Nevertheless, people do not shun Allan Gardens' floral displays because they are not composed of entirely native species growing in their natural environment - on the contrary, this is one of the site's largest draws, as it has been for many years. When not attracting crowds for the seasonal flower shows, there are few places in Toronto where one can see banana trees, giant golden barrel cacti and trees from Mexico and Madagascar that are about as old as the building itself. As one reporter learned from the superintendent, "the gardens occasionally receive visits from students studying English as a second language, who find the place especially welcoming," since seeing plants indigenous to their own countries is a reminder of home (DeMara 1998: n.p.). Perhaps the most consistent and basic attraction to this pedigreed landscape for many of today's visitors is the Victorian ideal of providing a place to escape from the noise and congestion of the city. Studies have shown that visitors to botanical gardens cite relaxation, aesthetics, peace, tranquility and refuge as the foremost reasons for spending time in these spaces, even though they recognise botanical gardens as having an important role in education and the conservation of biological diversity (Hatherley 2002). Furthermore, the ecological design that keeps plants warm in the winter is attractive to people, too, for as retired urban-design professor Norman Pressman has pointed out, "our parks are never designed with winter in mind, with all four seasons, unless they tack on a skating rink or something," despite the fact that we live in a country which has such long, cold winters (cited in Saunders 1997: C20). When meandering through the Palm House, people enjoy the particular type of nature they can see, and this is part of what makes the space and one's experience with it so unique.

The effect of security is an interesting point, since it says something about a certain degree of continuity in the conservatory's space and our appreciation for it. The Palm House is a sanctuary to thousands of plants and it secures one representation of history in a changing environment. After many years, Allan Gardens has grown to be a popular place to visit for families, seniors, school groups, floral enthusiasts, couples and, notably, some of Toronto's many homeless people. This evolution has changed the context in which we interpret the site, and has not gone unnoticed by those who manage the space. In the late 1980s, the City of Toronto initiated an "Allan Gardens Revitalisation Program" which aimed to renovate and help preserve the Palm House and outdoor gardens that were showing signs of old age (Allan Gardens Conservatory 1999a). A quick scan of the local papers from that time reveals a number of articles lamenting, or at least politely commenting on how Allan Gardens has become a well-known gathering point for homeless people. It was suggested that the revitalisation program could be a means through which the disrepair of the buildings (loosely equated with the "disrepair" of the surrounding neighbourhood and the people who might live in a nearby shelter, if indeed they live at any address) could be addressed in a manner which could balance restoring the old glory of Victorian architecture with contemporary social problems (see for example Foster 1986; Holden 1987; and Monsebraaten 1986). Recognising the reality of who the park's diverse users were, City officials "began on the premise that disadvantaged people have as much right to be in Allan Gardens as anyone else" and that "bringing more people in - and not driving existing users out - would be the most democratic way to put the downtown green space to more use" (Holden 1987: A7). Working such notions into new plans to revitalise the park was, even on a small scale, a process of redesign. The original intent of The Toronto Horticultural Society to create a free space where the public could relax in the beauty of nature has been fully realised, albeit in a way which they may not have envisaged. How might we frame our understanding of these changes?

Lofland (borrowing from Strauss 1961) has made the case that what we understand as "public spaces" may more accurately be distinguished as being either locations or locales, the former being "identifiable portions of non-private space in which the inhabitants are likely to be similar and known to one another" while the latter are likely to be spaces composed of people who are dissimilar strangers "merely categorically known to one another" (Lofland 1989: 456). As such, we could argue that Allan Gardens has undergone a transition from being a location (such as it was in the 19th century, with a particular group of people creating and enjoying a particular type of place) to a locale (such as it is today, where many people/strangers who categorically know each other only as "gardener", "photographer" or "homeless person" will interact without saying a word to one another). This transition is significant not just because it says something about the continuity of appeal found beneath the glass, wood and iron, but because the news stories which document this change reveal a modulating sense of conflict between what types of spaces exist in Toronto today, how public they really may be, and what constitutes the significance of their form.

In a structural sense, there are very few places like Allan Gardens in Toronto. Of the hundreds of parks that the City operates, Allan Gardens is one of 17 sites listed as 'gardens and conservatories', and one of only four that contains accessible indoor space. One of these

four that does share some attributes with Allan Gardens is the Cloud Forest Conservatory located downtown between Richmond and Temperance Streets, just west of Yonge. Smaller than Allan Gardens and displaying a greater intensity of contemporary architectural ideas nestled amongst large office towers, this unique space was designed by Harvard professor George Baird and won the Governor General's Award for architecture in 1994 (Harvard Design School 2003). Like Allan Gardens, Cloud Gardens is known as a favourite hangout for bike couriers, business types, homeless people, and tourists - in short, a diversity of people. In addition, it also has a small indoor conservatory of plants (free of charge) that climbs up the side of an adjacent building, giving visitors a lush, green setting from which they can look down into the reflecting pool below. The overall design aesthetic draws on some of the same traditions as Allan Gardens (an intricate, pedigreed representation and arrangement of natural features), but having a different history, there is perhaps less concern over the nature of this park, it is not nearly old enough to need 'revitalisation', and from its inception there was likely no doubt in anyone's mind that it would be a public space enjoyed by a variety of people, not just those who take the time to stop and smell the roses.

To think about what other popular open spaces exist downtown, contrast this with the pseudo-public courtyard of the Toronto-Dominion Centre, an inviting green square enclosed by a ring of office towers located in the heart of the financial district. The TD Centre's website lists the courtyard as a place that holds "interesting and fun community events," and the variety of summer lunchtime concerts that tenants enjoy is notable (Toronto-Dominion Centre 2003). But is the community in its entirety really welcome? While it may be one of a few open, green spaces in the downtown core, its existence is really the result of a density-bonusing deal, and probably not of the genuine desire to invite people - particularly the homeless - to enjoy this peaceful, security-monitored space. As Ruskin has noted, the creation of such seemingly public spaces is a questionable trend in urban development processes.

Some pleasing "public spaces" have been won by these means, both in the form of outdoor plazas, and indoor atriums and lobbies. These may accommodate small shopping centres, or provide a café and somewhere to sit down. Yet these spaces are not always fully "public." Their physical surroundings, the activities sited in them, and their distinctive atmosphere, influence which elements of the city population will feel welcome to come in, and which will not. Their enclosure and location also permit surveillance and discreet policing, in ways which open public spaces do not. Whilst they may be safer for some, they may also be more excluding of others. (Ruskin 1988: 57)



Matthew Cowley, Dome of the Palm House, digital photo

In light of this, we may ask ourselves how places like Allan Gardens are becoming especially valuable to the general public. As the downtown areas of our cities are increasingly privatised, and as parks become contested, regulated spaces (see for example Burrows 2001), does the public realm as a whole have to be carefully preserved like orchids in a greenhouse, requiring protection from the surrounding environment?

To someone who has no place to keep warm on a winter's day, the Palm House is a welcoming environment where people seeking shelter may feel greater acceptance from the staff who work there than from the increasingly gentrified Cabbagetown neighbourhood - a nearby area known as a slum for poor Irish and Polish immigrants not so long ago. On a broader scale, Allan Gardens has also been a centre of anti-poverty activism in recent years, culminating in the 'safe park' protest organised by the Ontario Coalition Against

Poverty in August 1999, which raised the local dialogue on homelessness, protesting, public space and the policing of these spaces to a fever pitch (see DeMara and Millar 1999; and Ghosh 1999). Furthermore, the park's proximity to lower-income neighbourhoods such as Regent Park, Moss Park and St. Jamestown (which are continuously reported in the media as areas of high crime and social problems) has altered the context in which residents from different parts of the city frame the site as a whole. There is a sense that "many city residents may avoid Allan Gardens because of the area's bad reputation," but as

one staff member stated, "people have to be realistic. It's downtown and it's never going to be like the turn of the century, when there were a lot of rich people living around here" (DeMara 1998: n.p.). Indeed, that observation is true, but there is continuity in the design of the site; plants have grown, neighbourhoods have changed, visitors have come and gone, open spaces have shrunk and the city has grown much larger and more obtrusive, giving the Palm House all the more reason to stand as a shelter over precious greenery. It is the Palm House itself which is most closely connected with life 100 years ago, but it has changed from being a sublime representation of current ideals in architecture and form to being an example of a functioning artifact from another era. As an artifact, the Palm House preserves the plants, and the design of Palm House preserves itself as an historical structure at the centre of an open space framed physically by city streets and mentally by one's perception of nature, design and public space.

In some respects, one could argue that the Palm House and Allan Gardens could be considered a heterotopia, "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1984: para 20): Victorian aesthetics, issues of urban poverty, tropical plants in a northern climate, a living artifact.

But what is critical for the continued vitality of this park is an understanding that these spaces are compatible in as much as we should ever expect them to be in the public realm of the city today.

The original intent of The Toronto Horticultural Society may have been to create a space in which the design, the users and the aesthetics were all naturally compatible, but the reality of urban public spaces today is that even in a city like Toronto which is known for its numerous parks, those spaces which people value most and identify as a part of their urban experience will always be appreciated and experienced even as the context in which they exist changes over time. Understanding this context and how these sites are situated in the broader environment can also tell us a great deal about why they are so important. Having a space for people to congregate and to enjoy elements of nature - be it pedigreed landscaping or otherwise - should not be underappreciated in our concrete jungle. Maintaining accessibility and inclusion in these spaces means that they will evolve along with the people who use them and can therefore reflect the true character of the city both past and present. It is for reasons such as these that parks like Allan Gardens shall continue to be spaces imbedded with value as long as they exist.

REFERENCES

- Allan Gardens Conservatory. 1999a. History of Allan Gardens' Development. Available at: www.collections.ic.gc.ca/gardens/History/index.html. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Allan Gardens Conservatory. 1999b. George William Allan (1822-1901). Available at: www.collections.ic.gc.ca/gardens/History/historyGWAllan.html. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Burrows, S. (2001). Sign, sign, everywhere a sign: rules and regulations are the order these days in New York's Central Park. *The Globe and Mail*, Aug. 15.
- City of Toronto. (2003). Parks and Recreation: About Us. Available at: www.city.toronto.on.ca/parks/about_us.htm. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Cronon, W. (1996). Introduction. In W. Cronon (Ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- DeMara, B. (1998). Gardens offer balm for the soul. *The Toronto Star*, Aug. 4.
- DeMara, B. and Millar, C. (1999). Park protest misdirected, councillor tells homeless: 25 activists arrested after pre-dawn raid at Allan Gardens. *The Toronto Star*, Aug. 11.
- Foster, J. (1986). Allan Gardens may regain glory of past. *The Toronto Star*, Oct. 20. A6.
- Foucault, Michel. (1984). *Of Other Spaces (1967): Heterotopias*. Available at: foucault.info/documents/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Ghosh, S. (1999). Behind the scenes at Allan Gardens (and the demonstration for the homeless). *Catholic New Times*, v.23, n.13 Sept.19. 9.
- Harvard Design School. (2003). Faculty Profile: George Baird. Available at: www.gsd.harvard.edu/people/faculty/baird/projects.html. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Hatherly, J. (2002). Myths About Visitors To Botanic Gardens. Available at: www.amol.org.au/evrsig/lib_papers/MA2002hatherley.pdf. Accessed 31/03/2002.
- Holden, A. (1987). Street people's needs considered in Allan Gardens revitalization. *The Toronto Star*, June 9. A7.
- Hough, M. (1984). *City Form and Natural Process*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company Ltd.
- Lofland, L.H. (1989). Social Life in the Public Realm: A Review. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, v.17, n.4. 453 - 482.
- Monsebraaten, L. (1986). Facelift urged for Allan Gardens. *The Toronto Star*, Aug. 6. A9.
- Olmstead, F.L. (1996). Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns. In Richard T. LeGates and Frederick Stout (Eds.), *The City Reader*. New York: Routledge. 337-344.
- Ruskin, M. (1988). Whose Public Spaces? In Luigi Mazza (Ed.), *World Cities and the Future of the Metropolises*. Milano: Electra. 51-62.
- Saunders, D. (1997). Park architects embraces winter designs: Summer parks don't reflect that shades of brown, white and grey dominate the landscape most of the time. A few architects are adjusting to the climate. *The Globe and Mail*, Feb. 22. C20.
- Strauss, A. (1961). *Images of the American City*. New York: Free Press.
- Toronto-Dominion Centre. (2003). Tenant Services: Building Maintenance. Available at: www.tdcentre.com/client/Cadillac/CF_Office_TDC_UW_V500_MainEngine.nsf/page/Building+ Maintenance?OpenDocument. Accessed 04/04/2003.
- Van der Ryn, S. and Cowan, S. (1996). *Ecological Design*. Washington, DC: Island Press.