

# Guest Editorial: Gardens as Laboratories

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Since 1990, backyards in Australia have been shrinking (Hall, 2010). Residential gardens are disappearing under the footprint of bigger houses, dual occupancies and medium-density apartments. Contemporary urban debates neglect the demise of the backyard, which has been a ubiquitous part of many western cities. Discussion about city development is polarised between ‘sprawl’, the continual expansion of city limits into productive land, and its counterpart, ‘density’ housing and infrastructure centrally developed. In the popular culture of reality television make-over programmes and lifestyle magazines, gardens have become hard landscape for ‘outdoor living’, fashioned overnight according to the latest trend. In each case, the garden is divorced from human acts of cultivation, which does not do justice to the complex role of gardens as spaces of social integration, play, food production, habitat and permeable surfaces to absorb rainfall and provide heat sinks.

While I recognise densification is essential to city development, garden suburbs are nonetheless a significant spatial and social legacy to be carefully considered. Holmgren (2012) suggests the suburban subdivision offers the perfect scale for retrofitting for food production and water and energy collection, should unpredictable climates and economic times limit access to fossil fuels. Each housing block could be reconfigured as part of the larger suburban neighbourhood. In this scenario, the garden offers a flexible space that can be scaled up to operate within a bigger productive urban field.

This special issue explores the legacy of the garden suburb and gardens in their complexity, as they exist now. The word ‘laboratory’ is used to highlight people’s dedicated projects and experiments in their gardens, involving long-term observation, experimentation and testing but without the controls of the scientific laboratory. The privacy of residential gardens allows for different kinds of exploration and experimentation, also at risk in certain density scenarios. Human endeavours in the garden have agency for its occupants and, beyond the garden boundary, in society at large.

Two kinds of papers feature in this issue: research on the role of gardens in society across various scales and in different parts of the world, and shorter essays providing a kaleidoscopic view into ordinary and inspiring ‘citizen gardeners’ in Melbourne. All show the relationship between society and the garden. They move across scales, from the city to the street and to specific case studies of individual gardens and gardeners.

In their papers, Fox and Scheerlinck and Schoonjans situate the garden in a broader urban context. Fox teases out the historical and political impetus for the

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garden suburb in post-war Australia. He traces the specific social development of the suburbs, not as an inevitable outcome of history, but to remedy the human ills as a consequence of war. Through an evaluation of streets in diverse socio-economic settings, including Tel Aviv, Bratislava, New York and Melbourne, Scheerlinck and Schoonjans conclude gardens are important structural elements that contribute to their social possibilities. They use the term 'collective space' to identify a quality that can operate across the public and private boundary.

Julian Raxworthy investigates the private garden of Roberto Burle Marx, the Sitio, in Rio de Janeiro, which Burle Marx called his 'landscape laboratory', although Raxworthy offers a different reading. The Sitio was used to test plants Burle Marx had collected from the wild, which were later used in professional landscape projects. Tregenza discusses a garden where the gardeners experimented with sub-tropical plants, cramming 90 types into a meagre 35 square metres. The produce, seeds and ideas were shared through community events and a local community nursery.

Georgia Jacobs discusses a Red Cross programme, 'Putting Down Roots', where gardens were a platform connecting asylum seekers with the local community. By working side by side, participants learnt about each other's culture and ways of life, while Australian mentors discovered the consequences of government policies on the lives of asylum seekers. Harrison discusses two models of garden for education. One is set in rural Australia where undergraduate students of landscape architecture learnt about design in the microcosm of the garden. The other garden offered lessons about traditional Greek food practices to the community through the Council for Adult Education.

Two gardeners working in different ecosystems use indigenous vegetation with environmental intent but towards different ends. McLean's garden, set in a coastal holiday village, has been regenerated with indigenous vegetation to connect a larger wildlife corridor, whereas Reynolds used hers to test the growing and cultivation of endangered species, having collected the seed from the adjacent volcanic grassland plains. Although in a suburban setting, Reynolds burnt the garden annually, to provide the necessary conditions for regeneration, an important part of the cycle often neglected. These tactics, while similar to those of Burle Marx at the Sitio, were undertaken for the preservation of species rather than for aesthetic reasons.

While working in small lots, these gardeners are operating at a larger scale, as part of the broader community and/or the biosphere. The garden allows citizens to explore things in private that can aggregate to affect society. The rise of the productive garden is a contemporary example. In this sense, a kind of porosity happens between the private space of the garden and the community.

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## REFERENCES

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