

The Importance of Preserving Gardens

By Walter Hood

Gardens document untold histories. In Michael Laurie's *Introduction to Landscape Architecture*, a featured section describes early United States colonial gardens. There is no description of the social or cultural context other than mention of the "landed gentry," a British social class of colonial landowners. He writes that "the South, with its tradition of landed gentry and a different type of society and government, was more conducive to the development of extensive gardens. Their inspiration came from imported gardening literature and European travel."¹ Two gardens are illustrated as examples; the Palace Gardens of Williamsburg, VA, with its European formal influence, and Middleton Place in Charleston, SC, embodying the French garden influence. Enslaved labor is never mentioned in either description. Middleton Place is not described as a former plantation, but as a set of wonderful garden experiences.

These untold stories of our historic gardens and landscapes can be powerful tools to help understand how inextricably bound together we are in this country, even throughout our painful past. An ecological history exists in plain sight, one shaped by colonial institutions that transferred their patterns and practices onto the North American landscape through cultivation and city building. During the past three decades, a plethora of buried histories have been exhumed from an array of gardens and landscapes: garden landscapes designed by the country's early founders, George

Washington and Thomas Jefferson, at Mount Vernon, VA, and Monticello, VA, respectively; national garden landscapes such as Dumbarton Oaks; and former Plantations such as Boone Hall, Charleston, SC, and Magnolia Plantation, Schriever, LA; to name a few. These histories tell a more complete and complex story of the labor, craft, and ideologies needed to manifest these canonized works.

The vernacular garden has always been a community and cultural resource in the United States. Cultural geographer Paul Groth writes, "When we call something a yard, it generally implies more value than something called a lot. In turn, we often treasure something called a garden." Most Americans can identify with the yard, as the US was developed incorporating the single-family open lot plan. These collections of houses set in an open lot, not attached, provide diverse examples of how the yard and garden are synonymous but also different. In many communities, the yards are parks and playgrounds along with terrain vagues, unbuilt due to infrastructure and natural systems. This landscape is our vernacular: yards with beautiful lawn and foundation plantings adjacent to yards with no plantings, just dirt, subsistence gardens in the backyard, screened-in porches, and paved patios and driveways. Yards and gardens reflect economic status in the US as well. Cut lawns reflect a status of investment and in many places there was no disdain for those who chose to keep the



Burial ground at Kitty Foster home on the south campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Photos courtesy of Hood Design Studio

yard bare, with just dirt; it just got used in other ways, like a place to fix the car in full sight of the street, or a gathering place with improvised table and chair, or a place to barbecue. In a manner, the single-family open lot plan, gives us individuality and landscape spaces that reflect our idiosyncratic patterns and practices. But more importantly, they allow for diversity within a homogenous design context.

Vernacular yards and gardens remind us of the labor of diverse artisans. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, Alice Walker writes: "For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality, which is the basis of Art." We find these artful expressions of the hands of unheralded gardeners in the vernacular. These are the everyday and mundane yards and displays you may find in every community. Akin to the validation of vernacular artist by the art community over the past few decades, from the quiltmakers of Gees Bend, to the documentation of African American domestics' landscapes as featured in Grey Gundaker's *Keep Your Head to the Sky*. William Westmacott's *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South*, published in 1992, produced cultural mappings of swept yards and images of fences, arbors, and decoration made from improvised materials. Also, the public's interest in multiculturalism in the 1990s saw the emergence of African American vernacular arts, cultural anthropology, geography, and history looking to the garden as inspiration. I dwell on these recollections of yards and gardens because, in addition to their significance to

my own life, they seem to be the one contribution by African Americans to landscape and geography scholars. The idiosyncratic treatment of landscape space is viewed as a cultural norm and not so much as circumstance. They were strangely similar to the yards of my grandmother and other relatives in rural North Carolina that I experienced while growing up.

Gardens reflect our attitudes and values for the world we want to live in. For the African American community, these attitudes and values shed light on our experience and contributions. John Michal Vlach elaborates on these important contributions using W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of two-ness, stating, "In terms of cultural history, we also note a certain duality. Black material culture can claim the heritage of a distant past reaching back to Africa and simultaneously a more recent historical source of inspiration—the response to America. The reservoirs of creativity were available to be tapped by Black artisans. Perhaps the same could be said of most craftsman in the new world, but Afro artisans worked within a set of circumstances that were special in the American experience. As slaves, they had new patterns of performance imposed upon them; the European world was thrust into their consciousness. The objects they made were, then, a result of dual historical influences, distant past and recent past, and two cultural influences, African and European. In the "two-ness of the Negro" we find duality doubled."² These gardens matter because they challenge us to see difference. Within this context of questioning and inspiration, the vernacular garden may seem overly romantic to understand the future contributions of Black people to the culture of garden design. If skill and labor were responsible for the construction of the designed world, and not just the



"Shadow Catcher" sculpture at Kitty Foster home on the south campus of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville



The Curtis 50 Cent Garden in Queens, NY

improvised vernacular, why is it hard to imagine that my ancestors, too, were artists, both male and female? And that the inherent creativity adapted through skill and labor, is knowledge transferred. These aspects of the vernacular garden need to be documented and preserved, validating the multidimensional and diverse contributions associated with American gardening traditions.

Two gardens illustrate the need to preserve and also expand the definition of gardens and their value to our lives and heritage. The first is a garden that commemorates a vernacular house and yard in the shadow of Jefferson's academical village, the University of Virginia. A free Black household and its owner, Catherine "Kitty" Foster, had all been forgotten as her home and yard on a three-quarter acre lot had been erased over time. Living and working south of the campus, Kitty Foster, a seamstress, purchased the land in 1833 and the Foster family lived there until 1906. The home and yard were part of a small settlement called "Canada." In 1993, as the University was performing preliminary excavations for its new South Lawn project, archeological features associated with the Foster family were found. The new garden features an archeological reveal that exhibits artistically improvised cobblestone walkways found during excavation. At the gardens center is a mythical sculpture, the "Shadow Catcher," inspired by Afro-American traditions of inversion, which signifies perdurance. The home footprint is overhead and inverted so its inside is reflective. As light cast over the piece, a shadow is cast on the ground and above, in the inversion, light reflects from a stainless-steel surface, evoking the intimation of the flash of the departed spirit. In 2011, the State of Virginia added the garden to the Virginia Landmarks Register. The garden is part of a pre-Civil War history for the African American community in Charlottesville, but also tells the history of service-based commercial relationship between free Blacks and the University.

The second garden, the Curtis 50 Cent Garden in Queens, NY, is part of the New York Restoration Garden's (NYRP) history and legacy. In 1999, as then Mayor Giuliani announced plans to sell the 114 community gardens to developers, NYRP collaborated with the Trust for Public Land and others to raise funds to preserve these plots of land as permanent gardens in perpetuity. Through their preservation, the NYRP and its founder, Bette Midler, have advocated for the definition of community garden to exceed the typical paternalistic subsistence garden as seen historically in marginal communities. Instead, they advocate for different and diverse gardens that reflect garden history and the communities in which they are a part.

As an example, the Curtis 50 Cent Garden is improvisational, sampling a familiar garden design and reshaping it into something unique and contemporary. In this case, it riffs on the Château de Villandry's Tender Love Garden with its heart-shaped parterres, one of four Gardens of Love. Here in Jamaica, Queens, in 2008, a garden is inspired by a French formal parterre garden, and is associated with its donor, an African American hip hop artist.

1 Michael Laurie, *An Introduction to Landscape Architecture*, (New York, NY: American Elsevier Publishing Co., 1975), p. 30

2 John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of Their Hands*, (Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 3



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