



DIETMAR STRAUB

SUMAC GARDEN

FACULTY ESSAY

CREATIVE ADAPPTIONS TO NEW WORLDS - GARDENS

Are we as humans still seeking paradise? Are we as landscape architects capable of supporting this search? Regardless, the innocent garden remains a powerful, timeless medium to promote a socially, ethically, and ecologically responsible culture in environmental design practice.

Gardens are an **archetypal** concept of humans trying to coexist with nature. There is no one single definition for the garden as the spectrum of interpretations and designs is so multifaceted through cultural history. For the Swiss landscape architect Dieter Kienast *"the garden is almost a metaphor for a pseudo-nature because it unites the antipodes – nature and culture – within itself. Where else can we better and more directly practice a careful relationship with the world than in its microcosmos, the garden?"*¹

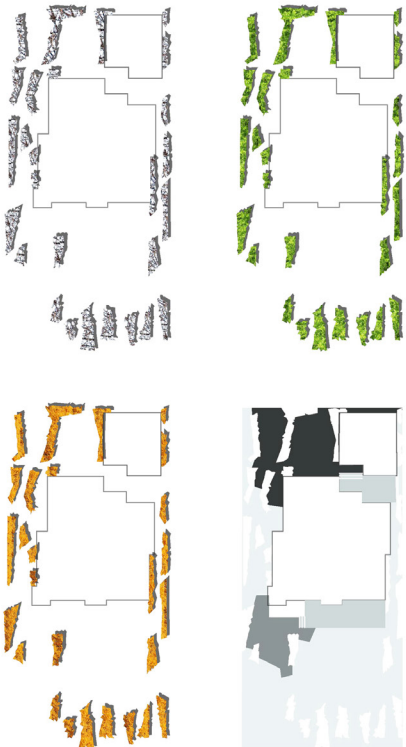
Gardens are ubiquitous phenomena and nourish our souls. They offer homo sapiens the opportunity to creatively adapt themselves to new worlds, led by the deeply rooted hope to maintain values of culture, 'feed' everyday needs, and create a place called home. Gardens are cultural landscapes based on the attempt to cope with the natural environment to expand the limitations of a place by simple manipulations. In Canada, Indigenous people weren't just hunters and gatherers. Along the west coast, some tribes maintained 'clam gardens' called K'yuk'yugwisnuxw. Making minimal obstructions to the tidal flow allowed them to cultivate seafood gardens.

Light and Colour: A dance of chlorophyll, anthocyanins, and carotenoids attract people, birds, butterflies, and small mammals

I have lived in many different places and have planted a large variety of gardens. Saying goodbye to these gardens upon moving, was always a very emotional act as to cultivate a garden means to get involved with a place and to settle down. I am therefore somewhat cautious with 'cultiver mon jardin'.

Fifteen years ago, we moved with our two young children from Germany to Winnipeg or, if you prefer, from the north slope of the alps into the vastness of the Manitoban prairie. The kids have grown to teenagers and a few gardens were designed, built, and cultivated for entry and experience.

Gardens have always been experimental grounds for innovation and improvisation and as a landscape architect, I am embarking on a search for expression for open spaces that falls between the adventurous and the everyday. I introduce **SUMAC GARDEN** as an example for my sensual garden experiments in our extreme prairie climate. This garden has been designed, built, and maintained with a family in Winnipeg over the last nine years and demonstrates how something small; the garden and its gardeners, find sanctuary within something big; the landscape.



Site Plan: The garden was packed with sumac and irregular hedges gather like strange creatures around the house

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Our era of screens heightens the importance of physical spaces and activities where we can re-establish contact with "nature". As the coronavirus lockdowns shutter public spaces, gardens hold open the possibility of immersing our bodies in the physical world. The unpretentious Sumac Garden reflects that 'cultiver son jardin' is possible or even desirable at a time of the global pandemic.

A house in Winnipeg had been renovated for a family of six. After the work on the house was done, it was the garden's turn. The key actors in this garden are the plants. Their multilayered compositions set the stage for diverse atmospheres and microclimates triggering associations to nature and paradise.

A pleasant welcome, parking space, a tool shed, room for waste, garbage, compost, a canoe, and sundried laundry. All should be integrated! Additionally, there was the wish to grow vegetables in some areas, to play badminton in an open space, and to install a sweeping swing in a tree. What a long list for a small plot of land!





TOP - BOTTOM:
(1) Light Canopy: The sumacs form a light canopy and a tranquil space between the house and the wide-spreading treetops of the matured trees
(2) Uneven Parallels: Sumacs love the sunlight, and the uneven hedges of Smooth sumac were planted along the lines of light

The branches of mature trees on the lot and neighbouring properties had formed an expansive canopy over the area. But a large elm tree infected with Dutch elm disease had to be felled, and this created a clearing bathed in light. We used a simple trick to structure the space and allow it to develop its own rhythm. Sumacs love the sunlight.

Art of Topiary

We packed the garden with sumac. Irregular hedges of smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*) were planted along the lines of light. These green figures gather like strange creatures around the house. The hedges provide privacy and take us on a journey through the four seasons of the Manitoba landscape. They define and separate all the functional areas without creating barriers or boundaries. The garden quickly transformed into an all-encompassing spatial experience. Friends, visitors, and strollers drop by the garden and enjoy the seasonal entertainment of colors and forms. It is a fresh interpretation of the ancient art of topiary.

Gardeners

We designed and built this garden together with the family. Grandparents, parents, and grandchildren were all involved. For years, the family stored old paving stones, concrete sleepers, boards, and pea gravel on their property. After cleaning, the paving stones were installed at the front entrance. Planting areas for hedges and perennials perforate the hard surface to absorb the surface water. Other areas are covered with a permeable pea gravel surface. All plants seem to grow free and wild in this breathing ground cover.

Breathing Space

In the wild, sumacs form thickets by self-seeding and root suckering. They can grow up to two feet per year. So far, however, everything is under control in this garden. The recycled concrete sleepers act as cages for the roots, and the homeowners are happy to let their homegrown sumac population increase naturally within those constraints.

Sumac Garden advocates for humble design thinking and proves the hypothesis that gardens have no expiry date. Dieter Kienast put it perfectly when he made the point: *"The garden is the last luxury of our time, it requires what has become most precious in our society: time, attention, and space. It is a true reflection of nature in which, again, we require spirit, knowledge and handicraft skills in careful dealing with the world and its microcosm, the garden."*² Chatting to the owners over the summer, they told us how they linger in their garden, how they 'cultivate' the plants, how they drift through the space looking at the flowers and leaves and constantly come across something delightfully new. The garden gives them a sense of security amid uncertainty.



Semipermeable: The sculptural hedges provide an almost paradoxical experience; they articulate and eliminate the boundary between private and public

Accolade

On April 7th, 2021, the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA) announced the recipients of their Awards of Excellence. *"The award-winning projects highlight new approaches and illustrate the levels of expertise to be mobilized to address current social, cultural and environmental challenges"*(Bernard St-Denis, Chair of the 2021 Awards of Excellence jury). **SUMAC GARDEN** in Winnipeg, designed by Straub Thurmayer Landscape Architects has been chosen by the jury for this prestigious award.

"The design represents restraint in every sense: few design moves, accomplished with the reuse of existing material and a limited palette of native plants. It cleverly combines found and collected materials; sweat equity, with the involvement of the designers; and extensive use of the common and resilient sumac. The intuitive and free-flowing layout provides a sense of ease and comfort in a semi-natural, sprawling garden space. This project teaches multiple generations about passion, technique, and the deep understanding of your choices. It is philosophical, daring and fully aware of its power" (the jury's feedback on the project).

Note: SUMAC GARDEN was awarded:
- CSLA National Award of Excellence 2021,
Category: Residential Landscapes.

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Straub Thurmayer Landscape Architects and
Stadtplaner

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