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De/Framed Gardens: 2011 World Horticultural Expo, Xi'an, China

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# De/Framed Gardens

2011 World Horticultural Expo, Xi'an, China

Karl Kullmann

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Following the Shanghai World Expo and the Beijing Olympics, the Xi'an World Horticultural Expo continued the recurring theme of using major events to influence the fortunes of cities. While many garden installations drew on kitsch representation of other provinces and countries, two collections expanded the ambition of garden exhibit design – the “Masters” of landscape architecture and the “Creative Nature” project by invited universities. The Masters’ Gardens showcased designs from nine internationally celebrated studios: West 8, EMBT, Mosbach Paysagistes, Gross.Max, Topotek 1, SLA, Martha Schwartz, DYJG, and Terragram (pictured). The level plots framed with bamboo reinforced the idea of the walled garden as an ‘other-world’ decisively withdrawn from the surrounding landscape. Accordingly, the Master’s gardens tended to employ thematics associated with the labyrinth and the grotto; of hiding and revealing, voyeurism and exotica. Conceived under the title “Creative Nature” by the University of Southern California, the other collection of gardens exhibit the design work of eight design schools: Berkeley, Columbia, University of Toronto, Architectural Association, Peking University, Hong Kong University, and Universidad Torcuato de Tella. As the University Gardens occupied lake-edge and up-slope positions,

Photograph by Karl Kullmann



the designs tended toward contextual synthesis and site specificity rather than isolation and abstraction. On reflection, the Masters' Gardens employed strong predetermined frames and tight visual choreographies, which concentrated their intended effects. Conversely, the University Gardens removed the frame as a conceptual tool, substituting controlled incremental experiences for total visual overview. A consequence of opening up the frame was to ironically reduce the visibility of the projects to visitors, who could not "see" them as gardens. While William Kent may have long ago "leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden," dissolving the dualism between the garden and the landscape remains fraught terrain for a garden expo.

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