Folklore and Forest Fragments: Reading Contemporary Landscape Design in Quebec

Peter Jacobs

Peter Jacobs, FCSLA and FASLA, is Professor of Landscape Architecture at the École d’architecture de paysage, Université de Montréal. He has been an Invited Scholar and Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia, Harvard University, and the Technion (Israel); and has taught in schools of architecture in France, Italy, Spain, and Columbia. He has served as Chair of the Environmental Planning Commission of the IUCN for twelve years, and more recently as Chair of the Senior Fellows, Dumbarton Oaks program of Landscape and Garden Studies. His professional work focuses on landscape and urban design and on the sustainable development of the arctic communities and landscapes of Nunavik, northern Quebec.

While contemporary landscape and garden design in Quebec is resolutely attuned to Western design practice, it is also firmly anchored in its local folklore and landscape setting. The hard granite base of the Laurentian Shield, covered by the green blanket of the boreal forest, inspires our collective memory as it does our sense of well-being. It represents a vast unknown territory, a seemingly unending source of useful materials, a refuge for flora and fauna, a shelter for human settlement and a source of artistic inspiration and expression. Above all, the forest excites our imagination.

The rivers that flow through the Precambrian Laurentian shield served as the pathways through the forests of the New World and as the only gateway to the interior of the continent. From the vantage point of mountain heights, discontinuous views of the vast forest floor revealed a fresh and wondrous wilderness with a diverse and rich array of flora and fauna (Figure 1). Jacques Cartier first observed this forest setting from the summit of Mont-Royal near the Indian settlement of Hochelaga, later to become the City of Montreal:

On reaching the summit we had a view of the land for more than thirty leagues round about. Towards the north there is a range of mountains running east and west (the Laurentians), and another range to the south (the Appalachians). Between these ranges lies the finest land it is possible to see, being arable, level and flat. And in the midst of this flat region one saw the river extending beyond the spot where we had left our long boats. At that point there is the most violent rapid it is possible to see, which we were unable to pass. (Burpee 1946, 30–31. Translated from Perrault 1996).

This description of the New World paradise, both Arcadian and sublime, continues to serve as a frame through which the forest is perceived, portrayed, and appreciated by those who inhabit it. The challenges inherent in the conservation and use of the forest domain have helped shape the intellectual framework and the values of the peoples of Quebec, much as it has in other cultures at other times.

The Brothers Grimm considered the forests of Germany as symbolic reserves of popular and oral traditions. Their fairytales were designed to “tap the vital reservoirs of culture and memory of the past, and to illustrate the values of the common folk not the rulers; the ways of life not of war and conquest” (Harrison 1992, 165). In the

Abstract: Whether intentionally or not, several young landscape designers in Quebec, Canada, have made use of the folklore and the fabric of the boreal forest as a metaphor that informs their project proposals. Recent designs for garden festivals in North America and Europe, projects for urban parks, and even town plans have been inspired by a concern for the future of the forest regime, a concern for its health, an appreciation of its beauty, and an understanding of its fragility. As a consequence of the hard granite Laurentian shield in Quebec, most of this forest regime is accessible only through the network of rivers and streams that serve as the highways of discovery and use of the forest landscapes. A number of contemporary landscape and garden designs are discussed with reference to the emotional forces that inspire a profound attachment to the forest that many call home. While these projects stretch the limits of our idea of the garden and of landscape process, they are warmly embraced precisely because they capture the essence of a landscape setting that resonates in the collective soul of the population to which they are addressed.
German Romantic imagination, the forest had both genetic and symbolic connections to memory and wisdom.

In Israel, the drive to embrace the forest as a national emblem is charged with emotion. Yael Zerabavel (1996) relates how trees symbolize the beauty, purity, and magnitude of nature, while planting trees leads to the redemption of the land, a means of reintroducing nature into the landscape. Forests redeem the fallen from oblivion and the land from affliction; the forest serves as a living memorial for the departed—a symbolic continuity from the past to future. An ancient forest creates ties with the past, new forests the promise for the future.

Yet forest precincts have always succumbed to our appetite for their resources. Plato decried the deforestation around the hills of Athens, observing that as a result of naval battles of conquest and commerce, "forests became fleets, sinking to the bottom of the wine-dark sea." Later, the clearing that sheltered the first inhabitants of Rome on the Capitoline Hill "long ago lost its limits, and from its wide open eye one can see today not only the ruins of a great ancient city but also those of an even more ancient forest" (Harrison 1992, 55).

In Renaissance England, the role of conserving the forest was a royal prerogative and responsibility. John Manwood (1592) wrote, "A forest is a certain territory of woody grounds and fruitful pastures, privileged for wild beasts and fowls of the forest, chase and warren, to rest and abide there in the safe protections of the king, for his delight and pleasure" (72). The Royal Hunt enacted a ritual that affirmed the role of the monarchy in protecting wildlife by subtracting vast reaches of woodland from the public domain. In short, if the forest ceased to be a sanctuary for wildlife, it was no longer a forest. Curiously, both the forest and the church of the time performed the same or similar functions; that of granting refuge. In some cases, the sanctity of the forest was used as a base from which "outlaws," such as Robin Hood, would operate to address the abuses of the monarchy and to re-establish the rule of natural law.

William Gilpin also bemoaned the fate of the beloved English forest, subject to the woodsman’s axe and the navy’s seemingly insatiable appetite for mature timber. Francis George Heath (1887) observed from the growing shafts of the nineteenth century English city:

Greenwood shade, over large areas has given place to hot and dusty streets. Railways, mines, and manufactures have obliterated, all around us, the forest lawn, redolent of the perfume of wild plants; the forest heath, empurpled with the bloom of heather, or golden with flowering gorse; the woodland copse and ancient stately grove which sweetly strained the music of the winds. (vi)

In the New World, where forests still covered about 35 percent of the United States and even more of Canada, Gifford Pinchot (1905) affirmed, "Next to the earth itself the forest is the most useful servant of man. Not only does it sustain and regulate the streams, moderate the winds, and beautify the land, but it also supplies wood, the most widely used of all materials" (7). Yet at the same time, C.S. Sargent, an equally distinguished forester, observed “we have wasted in less than a century enough forest to have supplied for all time a considerable part of the world with lumber” (Sargent 1896, 11).

Forests everywhere continue to shrink at alarming rates, subject to significant loss as a result of traditional practices of shifting cultivation and the gathering of fuel wood, as well as contemporary industrial practices related to uncontrolled logging and opportunistic development.

To feed and shelter the growing communities of the world and to continue to support economic growth, more land has been cleared for cultivation in the past 100 years than in all previous centuries combined. More than 11 million hectares of tropical forests are destroyed annually. As a direct consequence of this destruction,
between 10,000 and 100,000 species are reported to becoming extinct each year. (Jacobs 1990, 75)

Canada’s ancient Boreal forest, a ten-thousand-year-old ecosystem, is the largest wilderness forest in North America, yet more than 50 percent of this territory is registered in industrial forest tenure. Conservation groups argue that over six hundred thousand hectares of the Boreal forest are cut each year and that over 90 percent of this logging is subject to industrial clear cutting (Stark 2004). Sadly, one of the most significant stretches of the northern Boreal forest, in Quebec, is subject to encroachment from all sides (Figure 2). Only very recently has a government commission been charged with the mission of determining the extent of forest losses and the means of calculating its potential yield on a sustainable basis (Francoeur 2004). One hopes that these and other urgent measures are not too late to maintain a viable forest regime.

Interestingly, action has resulted not so much from an alert or vigilant government but by an outraged and creative citizenry and artistic community. *L’Erreur Boréale*, a beautifully crafted film by Richard Desjardins (1999), and other forms of art have served as powerful tools in focusing public attention on the future of the forest habitat. This phenomenon is particularly true with respect to a number of recent garden installations and landscape proposals in Quebec.

In the initial development of a theory of three natures, John Dixon Hunt (1996, 36) speaks of the debt that the formal properties of garden design, or the third nature, owe to the second nature of agricultural fields, irrigation canals, and orchards. In this paper, the debt is partially repaid insofar as the forest wilderness, or first nature, is given meaning and support through the intervention and ephemeral proposals of garden design.

Spatially, these projects interpret the forest as a blanket, a refuge for wildlife as for human occupation. Pathways structure movement and orientation through an immense and, at times, forbidding landscape. They traverse the forest, passing modest clearings produced by natural process or the need for human shelter and sustenance. More recently, the forest has been subjected to severe fragmentation from the intrusive pattern of human settlement, the mining of the earth’s crust, and our hunger for forest products. Wherever these transformations have occurred, at whatever time in human history, it is always the forest edge that defines the magical boundary between civilization and the wild, an edge that retreats if only to preserve its very integrity.

The forest blanket, its pathways, clearings, fragments, and edges represent a spatial matrix and design vocabulary used to structure contemporary concern for the future of the forest in Quebec. This concern is expressed with deep poetic feeling in a variety of garden and landscape proposals designed to shock, disturb, cajole, and plead for an understanding and an appreciation of our natural heritage and collective roots.

**Forest Blanket**

Canada shelters 35 percent of the earth’s Boreal forests and is home to millions of Canadians, many of them aboriginal. Economically, about one-third of this surface has been allocated to industrial development, hydroelectric projects, and mineral, gas and oil exploration, while logging occurs at a rate of a million acres a year.

Forestry is an integral part of the livelihood of one hundred thousand Québécois, generating about $12 billion yearly; Quebec is the world’s largest exporter of wood and paper products (Lalonde 2003, A5). As an ecosystem, “The Boreal forest filters millions of liters of water every day, stores carbon dioxide, produces oxygen, rebuilds soils and restores nutrients, holds back floodwaters, releases needed water into rivers and streams, and provides food and shelter for hundreds

![Figure 2. Logging the Boreal forest. (Photograph by Ministère des Ressources Naturelles, Quebec)](04402-Ch01.qxd 10/5/04 1:04 PM Page 87)
of species, including humans” (Lalonde 2003, A4).

The forest is also an important part of our national identity, a somewhat abstract concept that reflects the way in which the forest was inhabited, and the difficult history of logging at great distances from the family hearth in the cold and bitter winters of the northern reaches of Quebec. The story of the Chasse Galerie (Figure 3) conveys the sense of isolation that the forest represented, as well as the underlying moral fabric of the time (Beaugrand 1900/Boivin 2001). It is a tale that informs virtually all of the school curricula and is amongst one of the most beloved of bedtime stories:

It was New Year’s Eve in a logging camp in the Gatineau region. The men were having a well-deserved rest. They huddled about the wood stove in the shack and began telling stories, singing and tapping their feet. The bottle of Caribou was passed around, and soon they all began longing for their homes and sweethearts, far away in Montréal. Then the biggest and the strongest of them all suggested that they pay their families a little surprise visit. How could they do that, they protested, when they were leagues away in the middle of the woods, buried under mountains of snow? “Ah,” he replied, “The only way is by canoe.” At this everyone paled. They knew he meant the chasse-galerie. A risky venture, flying through the sky in a birch bark canoe. The Devil whispered such ideas into men’s ears with the hope of snatching their souls if they were not back in camp before daybreak. But they climbed into the canoe and sped off into the sky. They had to steer carefully, once they arrived in Montreal, to avoid the many churches reaching skyward. No easy task in the city of 100 steeples! But the big lumberjack kept them on track, and they returned to the camp just in time the next morning, a bit worse for wear but safe and sound and still in possession of their souls. (MIM 2003, 38)

Even prior to this folklore setting, the First Nations of the region had established an interdependent relationship with the forest. The Garden of the First Nations, situated in the Montreal Botanical Gardens, seeks to interpret the setting of the forest regime prior to the arrival of European settlers (Figure 4). The garden design is virtually invisible, much as the presence of the native peoples in the forests of Quebec left little evidence of their passing and the innumerable uses that they made of the forest resources.

The site plan features the various activities of hunting, gathering, and camping that are shared by all of these nations. The garden, located in a forest of mature trees organized to recall the forest environments of Quebec’s eleven aboriginal peoples still living in the province, features plants that were used for food, medicine, and spiritual ceremonies, and illustrates how the Iroquois practiced agriculture and horticulture.

As visitors move through the forest, they discover discrete design interventions such as stone circles in the ground where ceremonies may have taken place or where campsites with tepee rings may have been installed during a journey through the forest. The forest flows through and around the modern architectural pavilion, as discreet as the garden design, much as it flows over the garden.

Figure 3. La Chasse-galerie. Courtesy of Mosaïcultures Internationales Montréal

The legend recounts the pact made with the devil who, on festive occasions, tempted lumberjacks working in the isolated forests of Quebec to board a flying canoe in order to visit their families and sweethearts. They forfeited their souls if they failed to return to their camp site by dawn the next morning.
Yet, much has changed since the First Nations inhabited the Boreal forest. *In Vitro* (Figure 5), as well as a number of other projects to follow, is an ephemeral design located in one of the forest rooms that form the setting for the annual International Garden Festival in the village of Métis at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River some 600 kilometers northeast of Montreal. The project offers a commentary on the transformation of the forest as homeland and cultural setting to a simple commodity to be consumed, its products displayed on supermarket shelves.

The visitor is invited to enter the garden along a plywood walkway, laid diagonally across the forest clearing, where each of the standard industrial sheets is made of a different species of wood, carefully labeled and displayed. First confronted with wooden barrels planted with small spruce, a kind of mobile or nomadic forest uprooted from its larger natural context, the visitor is then faced with a metal shelving system that holds row upon row of jam jars that are used to conserve spruce cones or the multiple saplings used to reforest the clear cuts of industry, commonly referred to as “carrots.” Gigantic blueberries, a genetic experiment gone mad, remind us of the wealth of food and medicines that are trampled by the drive to log the forest (Figure 6). The design strategy of uprooting and disconnecting the forest from its natural matrix of support, and of displaying these components as products on the supermarket shelves of society raises both our awareness and our anxiety. That this is done with whimsy and visual grace simply heightens our willingness to confront the serious questions that challenge our understanding of the role of the contemporary forest.

The garden explores the meaning of the new forest, a site subject to industrial technologies, genetic research, and accelerated reforestation, usually achieved through the use of monocultures, all designed to increase the output of forest products. These contrast with the more traditional perception of the food, shelter, and calm of the forest and the visual and sensory qualities of movement through it. Production and use are juxtaposed to the natural and cultural setting. This dynamic is interpreted with a delightful sense of poetry and humor yet with serious concern for the future of the forest regime.

**Forest Path**

Movement through the forest along its winding paths reveals the patchwork quilt of forest habitat and the changing moods derived from openness and closure, sunlight clearings and the darkness of dense forest cove. François Terrasson (1994, 30) suggests, “A mental alchemy
occurs as a result of contact with the wild, with the oak and birch tree and with our origins. Silence and solitude, the forest is a place of magic, and should remain so.”

Ironically, in the age of science, we argue that human presence in the forest may well result in the forest’s demise. In our concern to conserve its mysteries, we guard the forest as an impenetrable place of little interest and even of danger to man. At the entry to a biosphere reserve, a sign warns, “this is a natural site that has not been exploited, these unique reserves are of exceptional scientific interest, respect them! Given that the forest, left to its own, is of little interest to man and that the paths can be dangerous, access is forbidden!” (Terrasson 1994, 25).

In other cultures and at other times, pathways through the forest were also perceived as dangerous and forbidding, but very much a required part of the journey in the search of knowledge. Aeneas wandered through the Avenus wood in search of the Golden Bough that would permit him to descend into the underworld, an underworld protected by the Stygian forest. In the well-known opening verses of Dante’s Divine Comedy his travels from the Selva Obscura in the Inferno to the Selva Antica of paradise, begin as follows:

In the middle of our life’s path
I found myself in a dark forest
Where the straight way was lost.
(Inferno 1, 1–3)

Only a long and circuitous path allows Dante access to Paradise and to the Selva Antica, the ancient forest of an earthly paradise, an enchanted forest that “has ceased to be a wilderness and has become a municipal park under the jurisdiction of the City of God” (Harrison 1992, 85).

Descartes, by contrast, insists that travelers lost in a forest ought “always walk as straight a line as they can in one direction and not change course for feeble reason” (Harrison 1992, 110). Whereas Dante’s pilgrim required divine assistance to escape the forest, Descartes relies on...
method to escape the random and disordered forest environment. His forest refers to tradition: “the accumulated falsehoods, unfounded beliefs, and misguided assumptions of the past” (Harrison 1992, 111). In both cases, knowledge and appreciation of the forest is acquired along the forest path.

In North America, the longest and certainly one of the most celebrated of these forest paths is the Appalachian Trail, developed as a means of introducing the wonders of this landscape complex to the increasingly urbanized population of the northeastern United States. As such it serves as an outdoor laboratory and a model of forest conservation (Simo 2003, 83–89), a continuing and critical challenge for our times much as it was for Pinchot and Sargent many years previously.

Two recent projects, both of which have strong links to the historic use of the forest along the upper South shore of the St. Lawrence River, illustrate the contemporary intricacies of the forest path. The first (Figure 7) focuses on the cinematic sequences inherent first in driving and then in walking through the forest landscape. The project entitled 90.0 Kilometers per hour deals with the different perceptions that are registered while driving along a winding coastal road with spectacular views of the majestic St. Lawrence River alternating with the closed and sheltered views of the forest until one arrives at the Garden Festival at Métis. Here the pedestrian changes rhythm and visual focus. The visitor is faced with a Herculean choice: to follow a well-trodden path to the historical gardens or to take the less evident forest path to the modern festival gardens. Ariane’s cord, in the guise of a Christo-like running fence, leads the way to the entry tents of the garden festival and thence to the promenade and overlook of the St. Lawrence River. It remains an open question as to which of the paths leads towards Diana and which to Venus.

The second project (Figure 8), À propos du Blanc, is one of a number of projects designed to extend the impact of the Métis garden festival to the resident population of the region as well as visitors to it. In this case, the garden proposed for the town of Amqui along the Matapédia River explores how land was appropriated from the forest setting from colonial times to the present.

The design strategy consists of weaving a path through the forest, a path highlighted by the insistent use of whitewash or white cloth located at the base of mature forest trees. Six gardens will be developed along this path, at the rate of two per year for the next three years, located first in natural clearings and later further afield. The initial history of the region is told in the first two of these gardens, from the forces of glaciation that shaped the landscape to the enormous efforts of man to clear the forest, creating farmland with fire. The color white invades the forest, serving to unify the experiences derived while moving through it, recalling the milestone markings along the old Kempt road,
the milk runs to the valley residents, even the teachings of the Ursuline nuns inscribed in white on the chalkboards of the time.

Forest Clearings
The idea of clearings in the forest assumes a largely continuous forest cover that shelters the flora and fauna of a viable ecosystem within which one finds small islands of openness. The integrity of the forest is subject to increasingly large incursions until the clearing surrounds and defines the remaining pattern of forest fragments, the inverse of forest clearings. The changing relationship of forest clearing to forest fragment lies at the very heart of a concern for the continued integrity of the forest and all that it shelters.

Clearings and forest cover play against each other in folklore and history. The sunlit clearings, enlightenment, are contrasted to the ignorance suggested by the brooding darkness of the forest floor:

As an obstacle to visibility, the forests also remained an obstacle to human knowledge and science, while the forest clearing provided a window on the world. In promoting the revolution of critical reason, Socrates believed that the city represented a triumphant clearing in whose sphere of enlightenment the shadows of the Dionysian menace—lodged in the forest—were dissipated. (Harrison 1992, 10, 38)

The interplay of the forest and the city is developed throughout history, as when Romulus, born of the forest, founds the city of Rome by opening an asylum in a clearing on the Capitoline Hill. The clearings in Thomas Cole’s second portrait of The Course of Empire: the Arcadian or Pastoral State, portrays a similar scene in the New World (Figure 9).

Later, in the context of the spreading settlement across the American continent, the forest became a source of recreation and scenic pleasure, particularly along the fringes of the growing city. Charles Eliot’s report to the Metropolitan Park Commission of Boston contained all the optimism and much of the mystery of this view of the forest clearing. He reminded the commissioners that “The purpose of investing public money in the purchase of the several metropolitan reservations was to secure for the enjoyment of present and future generations such interesting and beautiful scenery as the lands acquired can supply.” He assumed “the distant prospects will remain unchanged, because their very distance makes invisible the superficial alterations which man effects” (Eliot 1897, 7). Little did he realize that urban growth would become so all-pervasive, or how the reach of human settlement would extend in the New World as elsewhere across the globe.

The forest clearing punctuates the otherwise repetitive forest cover with points of visual interest that delight as much as they orient the traveler. It serves as a deeply imbedded

Figure 7. Paysage 90-0 km/h. VLAN Paysage: Micheline Clouard and Julie St. Arnault, landscape architects. Installed in the International Garden Festival, Métis, Québec. 2000. (Photograph by Atelier in situ, Jardins de Métis/Reford Gardens)

Vlan Paysage won the competition to develop a master plan for the International Garden Festival at Métis on a site adjacent to the well-worn and traveled paths of the historic gardens. The project was to be developed over a period of years, and initially, a visual strategy was required to lead the visitor towards the otherwise hidden delights of the modern experimental and ephemeral garden proposals.
metaphor that contrasts wildness with civilization, clarity with mystery. In his forestry report, Charles Eliot suggested the following:

After traversing long stretches of monotonous coppice, to emerge into grassy openings . . . set with occasional spreading trees, bordered or framed by hanging woods, beyond which rises perhaps some bold hill or ledge, is like coming to a richly interesting oasis in the midst of a bare desert, save that our desert is a close-ranked wood, and our oasis a sunny opening in it. (Eliot 1897, 18, 21)

He concludes that “Intricacy, variety, and picturesqueness of detail of rock and vegetation, combined with numerous and varied openings, vistas, and broad prospects, must serve as the sources of interest and beauty throughout the larger part of the reservations.”

The forest clearing reflects both the charm and mystery, the delight and pleasure of discovering an opening in the forest where the sky and sun become visible, the forest walls provide shelter and comfort, and the sounds and smells of the forest excite our memory. Such is the feeling conveyed by the forest installation Solange. The project (Figure 10) stresses the appreciation of the wonders of nature through artificial marks that celebrate the human spirit.

In this particular project, a garden competition for a summer festival held outside Lyon, France, designers were invited to address the theme of perfume. To do so, Claude Cormier wrapped sixteen thousand
silk flowers in six-meter high bands around a cluster of trees in a forest clearing, delimiting a special forest precinct. Perfume was interpreted as fantasy rather than fragrance, silk flowers were used to commemorate the role that silk played in the history and economic development of Lyon, and the overtly artificial nature of the proposal is intended to remind us all that the garden, third nature, is more a product of human endeavor than of natural process. But ultimately, the installation reminds us of the charming fairy tales that take place in the forests of our youth, where gingerbread huts and other charms awaited children as they passed along a path that led to the sunlit clearings of the magic forest.

A far less prosaic and sanguine view of the forest clearing is conveyed by the Sentier battu (Figure 11). It challenges us to understand and appreciate the force and impact that the expanding urban fringe exerts on the integrity of the forest fabric. The project suggests the process of savage clearcutting that occurs in preparation for site development and the irony of the carefully tended spreading lawn that dresses the forest wounds once the shelter is completed. From the heights of a raised wooden terrace or balcony, we survey a synthetic plastic lawn that screens, but does not completely hide, the clear-cut material below. Yet, amongst the twisted logs and twigs along the edges of the beaten path, new volunteer shoots emerge from the forest floor, providing some hope for the future, some sense of the irrepressible forces of nature.

Forest Fragments

As a direct result of the spreading urban shadow and its consequent impact on the forest regime suggested by Sentier battu, the Boreal forest continues to be transformed from a coherent and integrated ecosystem to one that is uprooted and scattered. The scale of the forest in Quebec is difficult to grasp, and extends well beyond a neat set of statistics; the extent of the forest cover stretches the imagination and defies
any familiar calculus. Wilderness has been defined as a land area of almost one million acres (four hundred thousand hectares) without prominent or marked evidence of significant human impact. Based on this definition, there are no wilderness areas left in the eastern United States, although there are such areas in the Canadian Boreal forests, mostly in their northern reaches at some distance from human settlements. The remaining forests are fragmented, incapable of supporting or sheltering wilderness.

A forest fragment is not at all comparable to formerly continuous forest cover, “making them inadequate habitat for many species that depend upon larger systems that meet their needs for survival” (Sauer 1998, 16). Patterns created by fragmentation are very different from the rich and shifting patterns created by gaps resulting from management by indigenous people or from windfalls and other natural disturbances. In the fragmented forest, there is no continuous forest matrix to block competing species and predators; rather, there is a continuous and connected edge that gives access to all places. In the old-growth forest, gaps are not connected; it is the forest that is intact.” (Sauer 1998, 17).

The consequences of fragmentation are one of the central concerns of Leslie Sauer’s book, The Once and Future Forest, as it was of John Evelyn’s work many centuries ago. Evelyn (1908) wondered how, “since our forests are undoubtedly the greatest magazines of the wealth and glory of this nation; and our oaks the truest oracles of its perpetuity and happiness, as being the only support of that navigation which makes us fear’d abroad, and flourish at home” (Book III, Part VII, 157), the forests of England could, on the one hand, lie fallow in Royal preserves “folded up in a napkin, uncultivated, and neglected while gentlemen gained a sudden fortune by plowing parts of their parks and
letting out their fat grounds to gardeners.” Later, but still in England, William Gilpin considered the forest as “not just the abode of ancient oaks and wild ponies, but also the seat of English liberty and its long resistance to despotism” (Scha man 1995, 137). The use and abuse of the forest landscape was a matter of great national concern, of national pride, and of national economic importance; in Europe and the colonies, it continues to be so.

A patchwork quilt is an appropriate contemporary metaphorical image of what has replaced the forest blanket of yesteryear. According to one report from Global Forest Watch, 40 percent of the Canadian Boreal forest is already fragmented, but there is no definitive study of how much of the forest remains intact ecologically, protected from the looming shadow of further fragmentation. Of the three hundred forty million hectares that remain viable, most are in the northern boreal forests. In Quebec, only 3 percent of these forests benefit from protection (Deglise 2003, A3).

Fragmentation suggests the gradual unraveling of the forest fabric, a fabric that has sustained the peoples of Quebec prior to and during European colonization up to and including current urban activities and forest practices. That the forest continues to serve as a cultural backdrop, even amongst the urban young, is illustrated by Les Pruches, used to animate a discotheque in downtown Montreal (Figure 12). The project consists of a spiral of tree trunks that support boxes of flowers that might otherwise be found on the floor of a forest clearing. The dancing crowd may very well recall the various festivals and celebrations that took place in villages and towns of the forest in years gone by.

While fragmentation threatens the integrity of the forest, it may also suggest opportunities to recall its historic role for current generations. A project proposal for the Village of Verchères that sits on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River some forty miles downstream from Montreal traces the history of the gradual retreat of the forest, the cultivation and subsequent settlement of the exposed fertile flood plain, and the opportunity to re-establish, if only symbolically, the importance of the forest and woods of yesteryear (Philippe Poullaouec-Gonidec and Peter Jacobs 1995).

The Village of Verchères pays homage to Madeline de Verchères, a young girl who successfully defended her village against an Indian attack while the men were in the woods hunting for winter provisions (Figure 13). The proposed landscape strategy attempts, once again, to defend the village now under attack from the encroaching shadow of urbanizations spreading across and along the St. Lawrence Flood Plain. The landscape fabric of forest and river that once defined the Village is reinterpreted with respect to a variety of interventions that seek to integrate landscape components of natural process and of symbolic import into the fabric of the village. The object is to re-appropriate the landscape both physically and in the imagination of the village residents. To do so, a number of landscape planning strategies are proposed including the attempt to reforest drainage areas and streams in the agricultural plain that might once again link the retreating forest edge to the village fabric and to replant long abandoned hedge-rows that once lined the fields that stretched from the river shore to the forest woodlots (Figure 14).

A more symbolic measure is suggested through the introduction of woodlot islands at the corners of the village, forest fragments intended to recall the distant forest but also to shelter the social activities and recreation that once occurred in close proximity to the village, yet remained somewhat sheltered from it. It was in these forest shadows that the first kiss may have been exchanged between young lovers, where the sweet sugar sap of the maple tree could be spread on cold snow to produce crisp maple sugar toffee, or simply where a family might picnic or retreat from the hectic pace of life. The forest fragment is charged with significance both as a symbolic shelter of social activity and recreation and as a temporary refuge for nature that is not subject to the parallel lines of the farmer’s plough.

Forest fragments may well provide opportunities in support of the need to imagine, if not actually manage, a forest regime that is healthy, that exhibits ecological integrity as much as social viability. The shift from forest clearing to forest fragment is a seemingly inexorable
trend towards the disenfranchisement of a storehouse of natural and cultural wealth. The inversion of the open space of the clearing in the forest to the forest as an object surrounded by open space is both socially and ecologically significant. It is at the interface of these two conditions, at the forest edge, that the dynamic and the future of the forest will continue to be played out.

**Forest Edge**

The forest edge is that critical, somewhat indeterminate, boundary that mediates the open plain and the broad forest cover. In Roman times, the god of sacred boundaries was Silvanus, deity of the outlying wilderness. The boundaries of *Res publica* and *Res nullius* were drawn at the edge of the undomesticated forests, where a sylvan fringe gave the civic space its natural boundaries (Harrison 1992, 3, 49). Marc Antoine Laugier’s “Essai sur l’architecture” (1755) proposes that the very origin of architecture is the forest hut, while Robert Geddes’ essay “The Forest Edge” (1984) speaks of the reconstructed forest as the architectural edge of the modern city. This critical boundary serves as well as the setting for the aspect/prospect aesthetic theory of landscape proposed by Jay Appleton (1975).

Until recently, relatively modest incursions at the edge of the forest occurred as the demand for agricultural land grew with a growing population, and then, as the need for housing stock grew at the edge of the urban fringe. To a certain extent, this forest edge was the negative or inverse expression of the *Hortus conclusus*. Open space defines the forest garden, rather than the forest walls that define the surrounding wilderness. It is at this edge that the forest is most vulnerable, where certain stories have developed, in part to defend or maintain the integrity of the forest itself. Much of western literature and folklore treats the edge of the forest as a line that, once crossed, can, and frequently does, result in personal transformations as well as collective cultural change.

The forest in Aristo’s *Orlando Furioso* was full of magic, monsters, knights, and strange adventures. Orlando wanders into a beautiful, idyllic, enchanted forest where, confronted by the protestations of love between Angelica and Medoro, he loses his mind. Unable to abide the pastoral idyllic setting of Petrarch’s Arcadia, a false metaphor of the troubled times in which the warrior lived, Orlando uproots the forest.

The forest edge is, as well, witness to cultural inversions; as the city becomes sinister, the forests become innocent, pastoral, diversionary, comic. The forest can be used to express moral outrage as at the end of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where “the moving forest of Birnam . . . symbolizes the forces of natural law mobilizing its justice against the moral wasteland of Macbeth’s nature.”
We are reminded of the moving forests, equally outraged with the “evil empire,” in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. A far less intellectual, but just as powerful, perspective of the forest edge is contained in the folklore of Quebec, inhabited as it is by the Feux Follets, or Will-o-wisps (Figure 15):

The Feux Follets can be found at the edge of the forest on moonless nights pursuing the late or lost traveler, dancing around them and playing tricks, startling their horses into rearing and throwing their riders into the ditch, or simply leading them astray into the impenetrable cover of the forest. They may be disciples of Lucifer himself or simply suffering souls performing penance. There is, fortunately, a simple way to deal with these lost spirits. By sticking a needle into a tree trunk they are diverted into their favorite pastime, passing back and forth through the eye of the needle, allowing the traveler time to escape. (MIM 2003, 81)

Another contemporary project, the *Lipstick Forest*, moves the idea and memory of the forest from the large expanse of the Laurentian Shield to the context of urban Montreal (Figure 16). The project is inspired by, and makes reference to, the adjacent Mont-Royal, the same that was climbed by Jacques Cartier more than four centuries ago. The mountain forest exists to this time not only as a park, but also as the central icon of the city itself. In the early
colonial period it was viewed as an impenetrable forest and dangerous refuge for the nearby Indians; civilized and settled in the nineteenth century industrial city, it was portrayed as picturesque; in the nineteenth century it served as the democratic setting for the green lungs of the city; and, currently, it offers the site of choice for the multicultural activities of a citizenry with an increasingly diverse set of traditions and values. The mountain forest has always served as the edge of the city even while being surrounded by it. Why not reinterpret this edge in the context of the urban core?

The Lipstick Forest is a winter garden, sited over an underground expressway, straddled between two concrete slabs that form the first floor of an international conference and exhibition center. To the passing observer, a forest of large trees sits at the edge of the thin glass plane that separates the outside from the inside, the harsh winter climate from the warm interior. As one would expect during the winter, the trees have lost their leaves and pay homage to natural process and the occasional rigors of exceptional winter phenomena, such as the ice storm of 1998. The setting is anything but natural.

In fact, the design "parti" delights in the interplay of the natural and the artificial. It is rather obvious that a tree cannot take root on a concrete slab, and the alternative of a tropical winter garden in a northern climate seems somehow out of place, if not a tired cliché. Why not suggest the forest in ways that are clearly artificial (Figure 17), that propose the reference of the forest edge as a metaphor of the transitions that occur in all aspects of natural and artificial process? The Lipstick Forest is artificial, but not false. Each tree is different; each is sculpted individually, floating above the floor and below the ceiling to stress the lack of roots. The pink bark, chosen from a palette of lipstick color charts may make reference to Montreal’s well-known “joie de vivre” and to its thriving cosmetics industry.

The forest reflects the adjacent mountain park and recalls the colors and spirit of the Montreal-based cosmetic industry. As such it questions our sense of the relationship of culture and nature, of the artificial and the natural. Reflections, once again located in a forest room of the Métis garden festival, does both by positioning a triangular prism in a partially cleared forest setting. The prism, some 20 feet six inches on a side, is built of two glass sheets that sandwich a.
transparent green film. The carefully designed visual effect allows observers to look through the prism at the same time as the prism reflects the forest that surrounds them. The effect is heightened insofar as the interior of the prism surrounds a few birch trees within the clearing, adding an additional dimension to the reflected forest images (Figure 18).

**Colored Reflections** offers the possibility of multiple readings of the forest landscape. Passing visitors moving along the forest path may well miss the prism altogether if they misread the reflection of the forest in the glass walls for the forest itself, or they may read the reflection as an overlay of the filtered view of the forest behind the walls. They may also catch a glimpse of others reflected in the mirrored wall, people watching other people watching nature in the forest. We are left to ponder the changing and overlapping images of the forest, and the multiple impacts of experiencing the forest edge directly, through a partially filtered screen, or as a reflection of nature and of ourselves.

**Conclusion**

Whether intentionally or not, a group of young landscape designers have made use of the folklore and the natural fabric of the forest as a metaphor for their project proposals. They have chosen to explore the emotional forces that support a profound attachment to the rugged landscape of Quebec and to the forest landscape many call home.

While they understand that the forest serves as a natural refuge, the forest is, as well, a repository of our collective memory and one of the critical sources of society’s knowledge and wisdom. Thus the appeal to conserve the forest for purely utilitarian reasons, sometimes mistakenly called sustainable development, makes little or no sense in the absence of the stories and legends that animate our appreciation for it.

It can be argued that recent garden designs, landscape projects for urban parks, and even town plans such as that proposed for the Village of Verchères, are inspired by a concern for the health and future of the forest regime, an appreciation of its beauty, and an understanding of its fragility. They are well received and often warmly embraced, not so much for their beauty but precisely because, as William Gilpin suggested, they address our imagination through themes that resonate in the collective soul of the population to which they are addressed.

The forest that once blanketed North America, and still covers a large part of Quebec, is a critical component of our consciousness, our mind set, and our culture. The forest is embedded in the folklore, legends, and oral history of the First Nations and as strongly, although differently, in the descendents of the colonial settlers that first ventured down the Saint Lawrence River five hundred years ago. The forest has gradually been transformed as forest clearings have become forest fragments, and contemporary inhabitants of the forest now experience a landscape setting that is radically transformed and yet familiar by its presence. The forest’s ability to accommodate many readings is a testament to the enduring strength of its natural fabric, a quality that is literally literally reflected in the glass walls of the Colored Reflections prism.
different than that of our ancestors’ experience.

This sample of contemporary landscape and garden designs in Quebec suggest that there is still a strongly felt need to maintain the role, and to repair the health of the forest as an essential aspect of our collective consciousness. Folklore and modern parables are debated and shared precisely because they evoke a deeply felt attachment to our understanding of place. But we seldom articulate this bond, and all the figures, graphs, and statistics that address the loss of biodiversity, or the unsustainable use of the forest are quickly lost in the crush of everyday, more immediate concerns. The strength of the proposals of landscape and garden design reside in their appeal, not just to the intellectual concern for the future of the landscape, but to our overwhelming passion to maintain the habitat we call home.

References


Editor’s Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented by Peter Jacobs as the Annual Public Lecture, Dumbarton Oaks, Program of Garden and Landscape Studies, in Washington DC, November 29, 2003. Subsequently, it has been edited for clarity and length appropriate to Landscape Journal.