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garden: a microcosm of ecology, man and nature

BY WU YEN YEN

Discussions about the environment and global sustainability these days are rampant, calling to public attention overdue and urgent concern towards our precious ecology. Almost overnight, the word 'green' has taken on new dimensions beyond simply a colour or a collective term for plants; beyond simply referring to green in a garden. Sadly, any discussion about sustainability and the environment inevitably becomes lengthy discourses about mechanical and commercial processes because manufacturing and industrial processes are widely believed to be primary reasons for pollution and the consumption of natural resources. However, our fundamental task is uncomplicated and that is to restore the fine balance in the natural ecology of man and nature co-existing.

Most often, a microcosm of this vast ecology can be represented in a domestic realm where the connection between man and nature is most direct. That space is the garden. Traditionally valued as places of leisure and occasionally art, attention towards garden and landscape design has also taken a different angle. Be it a by-product of environmental discussions or rising public education on lifestyle and design, landscape design is now readily being appreciated, steadily garnering more influence and recognition. The various schools of thought towards landscape design too are as varied as the designers themselves.

We catch up with 3 landscape designers and find out what are some of the directions of current landscape design. They are **STAN LEE** of Watermount Gardens, **ALAN TAN** of National Parks, and **DIMITRI XENAKIS** and **MARO AVRABOU** of a same name partnership from France, offering a diverse spectrum of views. From Stan, we gain insights to luxurious private gardens and the rising commercial viability of gardens. From Alan, we revert to old values of skill and craft seen in his own intuitive responses to the art. From Dimitri and Maro, we catch a glimpse of avant garde conceptual interpretations of a garden in an abstract, philosophical framework. Our education of landscape design gains dimension.



Dimitri Xenakis

DIMITRI XENAKIS and MARO AVRABOU

As a team, Dimitri and Maro are, strictly speaking, concept artists. Hailing from France, the pair came from diverse backgrounds of visual arts and lighting design to arrive at a collaboration that still encompasses those disciplines with a focus on natural and urban landscape design.

Through our chat, we learn that in Europe, especially France, there are very rarely any more existing primary forests. Through the course of history and civilisations, forests have been destroyed, resuscitated and re-planted as such, rendering their existence a result of man's action. How this is important, Dimitri explains, is that it sets up a historical and cultural framework of relationship between nature and man in France. This view, however, is not new, deeply steeped in European tradition.

As Elizabeth B Kassler observed in *Modern Gardens and the Landscape* about the European tradition of garden, '*Nature played a subordinate, almost extraneous part in these gardens of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for rational man, divorced from his biological context, acted in his Biblical role as lord of creation. Imposing his magnificent mathematics upon land and plants alike, he ordered the garden around his own triumphant progress down a straight central axis—an axis given special authority by its symmetrically balanced sides, and forced recalcitrant greenery into Euclid's ideal shapes. As formally geometric and architectural as the building of which it was the logical extension, the garden was man's triumph over nature. More than any art form, it was direct expression of man's faith in himself as center of the universe.*'¹

For Dimitri and Maro, the garden is thus a reflection of culture; it represents the relationship of man and nature at different points in time and place. Though extreme, it is interesting to contemplate this notion that all gardens are man-made through man's act of selection, nurture and maintenance. And since in every specific site, city and civilisation, the relationship is different, so are the landscape design and sensibilities. Just as a canvas can potentially take on endless possible paintings, a garden as an art form registers social action and natural process of time and growth in

a single ecological environment.

Their entry to this year's Singapore Garden Festival showcases a series of cascading planter boxes painted in bright colours complimenting the colour of the flowers which it holds respectively. Sheets of coloured film hang from a space frame structure, casting coloured light and creating coloured views of the landscape when seen from various angles. The pavilion displays the bright flowers of France in orthogonal planter boxes whose sizes, contents and colours are painfully matched. Designed to represent France, the installation embodies the designers' take that the garden is isolated from man. Through harsh contrast of organic and geometric, the statement clearly made is that French gardens are by no means seen as organic entities. The garden is structured through control, organically detached from human nature. It is a physical construct made by man to be enjoyed, viewed and kept distinctly separate.

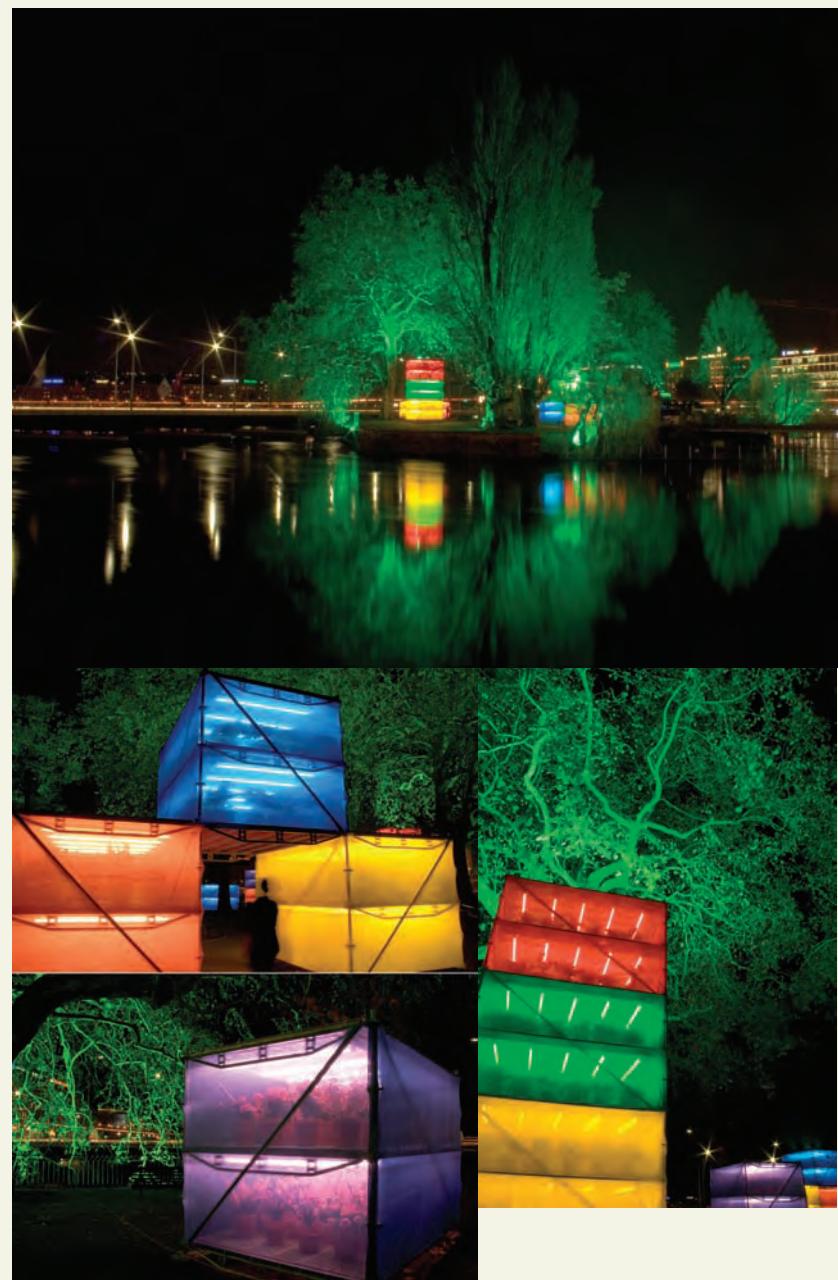
Just as sampling of their work, Dimitri and Maro's landscape designs often use strong geometries with greenery to juxtapose the natural and the artificial, invoking a powerful sense of new relationships and therefore perspectives. By thoughtful placement, lighting, colours and form, the audience is forced to re-think the way landscape is seen. Embraced as the guiding philosophy, the pair's conceptual design statement is to demonstrate harmonious balance of man and nature through their work. In that sense, Dimitri and Maro's landscape design invites one to contemplate their own personal relationship with nature.

It is refreshing to see that the garden can serve as a reflection of one's character and by inference, one's stand on nature and environmentalism. At the same time, it is even more heartening to know that landscape design has taken progressive steps towards contemporary philosophies. As Dimitri and Maro has shown to us, landscape without intervention is nature but landscape with an artist's conceptual intervention becomes garden art.

¹ *Modern Gardens and the Landscape*, revised edition, by Elizabeth B Kassler, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1964, p5.



Maro Avrabou



Trees and lights Festival
(Geneva, 2007)



**'Painting with Nature:
An Everchanging
Landscape'** (Singapore
Garden Festival, 2008)



Street Garden



Gravity (Belgium, 2006)



The Game of Venus and Chance (France, 2006)



Fairyland in the Woods (France, 2005)