

Thomas Church, Garrett Eckbo, and the Postwar California Garden

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The year was August 1945. The war was over in both Europe and Japan, after almost five years of intensive American involvement. The world was again “safe for democracy,” as a propagandistic slogan of the times had promised. To the population at home, and to the millions of men and women still in military uniform, the future seemed without limits. A basic optimism and the belief in a better future washed over America, and with it the promise of new jobs, new products, and a better life.

Of course, the transition from a country geared for war to a country returning to normal life was not smooth. There were problems of repatriation and problems in reorienting defense production. And there was the major problem of habitation. To reward America’s fighting men and women, a law for qualified veterans--the so-called G.I. Bill provided college educations and financing for homes through low-interest loans. While the defense industry made some attempts to turn production efforts toward residential construction, for the most part it was a builder such as William Levitt who produced the single family house on a scale that changed the structure of American urban settlements.¹ The center of gravity shifted outward, to the suburbs. These tended to be small houses, rarely over 180 square meters, with a front yard adjusted for the social propriety of greeting one’s neighbors, a minuscule side space (a meter or so wide), and a back yard, which was intended to be landscaped. And it is here in the suburban garden where we focus on the contributions of two California landscape architects: Thomas Dolliver Church and Garrett Eckbo.

Born in 1902, Church had begun his own practice in the early 1930s, working in a style rooted in Mediterranean formality but tempered by the informality of the California climate, vegetation, and life style.² Early works included his own garden at a planned golf community called Pasatiempo, located about 100 kilometers south of San Francisco. While Church maintained a certain formal rigor in the entrance garden, the rear of the house fell almost immediately into a tangled mass of native trees and shrubbery. In collaboration with architect William Wurster, Church planned the 1935 Butler house and garden around a sizable California live oak, dividing the house into four pavilions opened to the views and the breeze. Modernity in both cases drew upon a strong consideration of locale and vernacular tradition.

Despite the successful landscape designs of the 1930s and the triumph of merely maintaining a practice during the Great Depression, in the Pasatiempo gardens Church displayed competence and sensitivity rather than true innovation. It was only in the years following the end of the war that his landscapes achieved an unquestionable modernity that became recognized worldwide. We should note here that the Church office always remained small--rarely over five people--but that it attracted the best design talent in the West. In the early or late 1940s, Lawrence Halprin, Douglas Baylis, Robert Royston, George Rockrise, and June Meehan all worked in the Church studio, and most of them would achieve recognition in their own practices.³

Thomas Church was also a prolific author, and in writings as in practice, he recognized that the size of the suburban lot for which he designed was shrinking rapidly.⁴ Although he still attracted wealthy clients with considerable land and economic means, he equally served those with more modest budgets. For them he tried to maximize the resources of their limited spaces. Through careful comprehensive planning, one could avoid costly mistakes and take full advantage of what the site offered. In an era of “do-it-yourself,” the amount and range of growing materials were reduced, concrete strips made grass cutting easier, and planting beds were raised. “Curbs may be low and simply define a planting space,” Church wrote, “or they may be higher and broader and comfortable to sit on.”⁵ In many instances Church concealed the boundaries of the site, using mystery to disguise the house or yard of a neighbor. In other instances, however, when seeing the limit was unavoidable, he celebrated the required fence or wall using new materials like cement asbestos board or fiberglass panels that lent an air of modernity to his gardens. He championed the use of corrugated cement asbestos board for fencing, noting that “It relies for decorative interest not only on its own structure but on the alternating patterns of sun and shade.”⁶ Effective privacy made a good garden, he

believed; it was a basic quality because it allowed the owner to express his or her individual freedom within a community (keep in mind these are the Cold War years and the years of the communist “threat”).⁷

Of the vast production of Church’s office--it is said to have numbered over 2,000 gardens--I want to select only two projects created about the same time, 1947-1948. In many ways, I must admit, these are not typical Church designs: they represent the apex of his modernity and they were probably never equalled in this regard by his later work. But they were also masterpieces--one small, one much larger--and one of them became the icon of the modern Californian garden internationally.⁸

The ocean front in Aptos, California--also about 110 kilometers south of San Francisco--was further developed as a vacation community in the immediate postwar years. In this area William Wurster had built his famous Clark Beach House in 1937, addressing the site’s strong winds and frequently foggy cold with a pair of glazed porch enclosures. For the Martin family, architect Hervey Parke Clark proposed a U-shaped arrangement of living, entertainment, and sleeping spaces opening to the Pacific Ocean. For protection from the surf, the site had been raised about 120 centimeters above beach level, but each house site still received direct access to the sea.

Church’s proposal was restricted in its elements, geometry, and plant species, given the periodic nature of habitation and the strong salt content of the air. For the children’s play, there would be a sand area rather than the more restrictive sand box; the sand within the garden zone visually connected with the ocean shore beyond, bringing the far near and vice versa. Tree plantings were restricted; ground covers blanketed the remainder of the site. To extend the interior living spaces, Church proposed a checkerboarded wooden deck and zig-zag benches for use as seats or surfaces for sunning.

In many ways, the planning of the Martin garden was quite ordinary--certainly, these were elements and relations typical of the time, or at least typical for a Church garden at that time. However, the deft replacement of a central lawn of grass with a “lawn” of sand was a master stroke, completely changing the reading of the garden. Church’s book *Gardens Are for People*, published in 1955, was filled with ideas of just this type. Nothing fancy, nothing too complex, nothing too expensive, and many things that you could do yourself. “Don’t fret if your garden is never quite perfect,” he cautioned, “Absolute perfection, like complete consistency, can be dull.”⁹ The biomorphic curve and the zig-zag elements--each with roots in the arts of painting and sculpture or nineteen twenties garden precedents in France--announced the modernity of the landscape. But the announcement of modern form was secondary to addressing human comfort.

The Donnell garden took form on a hillside in Sonoma, at the top of San Francisco Bay. Curiously, the garden was built before the house, on a site favored by the Donnells for picnics and other family gatherings. The program first called for a pool, suitable paved surfaces, and a lanai (an Hawaiian word normally interpreted as a porch or breezeway). Church, with Lawrence Halprin and the architect George Rockrise, created a synthetic work that grew from the qualities of the site. Most of the existing California live oak trees were spared; the pool was the garden’s central feature, surrounded by extensive paved areas for use by family and friends. Where the hill fell quickly, these concrete surfaces were extended as wooden decking, configured to embrace the existing trees.

Of course the pool is the most noticeable of the garden’s features. While it appears to be free form, it is actually planned using compass shapes set at a forty-five-degree angle. But in its positioning, the form reads far more complexly than its actual shape, a complication heightened by the varied sets of paths of movement across the site. As an island in the water, a monumental sculpture by Adaline Kent provides a focal point and destination for swimmers: beneath the surface a large void in the sculpture’s base tempts younger swimmers to pass through.¹⁰

The lanai and the later dressing rooms complete this perfect modern ensemble. The dressing structures look out away from the pool area and cast only a blank facade in that direction. Sliding glass walls and a continuous bench set along the stone retaining wall join interior and exterior as a part of the California Modern dream to fully integrate inside and out.

The Donnell garden achieved widespread fame almost from the time of its completion in 1948. It was extremely photogenic as well as unusual in form, and as a result, it appeared in popular home magazines as

well as professional journals. The garden represented everything modern about California living and helped promote a lifestyle in which living outdoors shared equal importance with life inside the home. Not incidentally, every photo of the garden published by investigation, to Church the garden was most importantly a means by which to live well. As architect William Wurster had phrased it, architecture was the picture frame and not the picture.

Garrett Eckbo was eight years Church's junior, but he represented a different generation, one more powerfully committed to the present and the future rather than to the lessons of the past.¹¹ He, like Church, completed his undergraduate degree in landscape architecture at the University of California at Berkeley and graduate work at Harvard University. While Church worked with architects as their equal, Eckbo learned from architects, but many of his own proposals led the architects in devising their own designs. Unlike Church, whose practice would remain small scale and centered on the individual garden, Eckbo took on progressively larger commissions, including--in the 1960s--the strategic open space plan for the entire state of California.¹² Eckbo's ideas were more deeply probing of the issues of society as a whole, Church's on society as a band of individuals. In many ways, at least in his mature years, Eckbo thought of the broad landscape and society first, before focusing on the garden; Church started with the individual and the private garden and moved outward towards larger concerns thereafter.

But let us focus only on one area of Eckbo's broad vision and scale of enterprise: the private garden in the postwar years.¹³ Like Church, Eckbo could see that the small garden was an important arena. While his vision accepted the shrinking size of the average house site, he deplored the economic forces behind the trend. Even before his graduation from Harvard in 1938 he had proposed, and published, a hypothetical study called *Small Gardens in the City*.¹⁴ Here he divided a typical city block (in this case based on San Francisco) into a series of lots for which he designed eighteen garden variants. Some were more formal; others more natural; some more heavily planted. Some used diagonals and rigorously straight lines; others relied almost exclusively on the radius or free curve. Eckbo clearly demonstrated in these projects that lot restrictions were no excuse for any lack of ingenuity: in fact, these constraints forced the designer to be clever, and to invent methods of maximizing minimal means. In many ways, the *Small Gardens* project outlined the full sweep of the Eckbo vocabulary used in his years of practice; it was almost all here in microcosm.

Eckbo's vision was always social, if not completely socialist, and his first major undertakings were destined for the lowest stratum of society.¹⁵ They were the migrant agricultural workers during the Depression made famous--if that is the word--by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Executed within a few years after his graduation, Eckbo's designs for the Farm Security Administration camps utilized some of the period's most advanced ideas in landscape architecture. Reviewing his many perspectives, plans, and axonometrics, we see that the concern was always space for use rather than formal pattern, employing various species of plantings to define spaces for human activity and architectural purpose.

Much of the Farm Security Administration work never reached fruition; none of it reached maturity or remains today. But the intentions behind the work still ring true and seem to have informed a number of Eckbo's later projects, in particular the comprehensive plans for several subdivisions in the Los Angeles area.

To achieve a parity with the gardens of Thomas Church, let us here select three gardens by Garrett Eckbo. The first of these, the Goldstone garden, was realized in 1948 in Beverly Hills and demonstrated the landscape architect's concern with vocabularies drawn from the new art. The elements of the program embodied in the design start with the client's concerns and included a swimming pool, dressing rooms, and natural areas more commonly associated with a real California garden. Given the limited size of the site and the use requirements, a sizable proportion of the garden was paved and walled. This was also done to reduce maintenance.

Here vegetation disguised the boundaries of the lot, complicated the reading of the space, and softened the connection with neighboring houses and gardens.

If Eckbo addressed the human requirements of the program in the design, the vehicle he used directly cited non objective art in general, and the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky in particular.¹⁶ The use of multiple foci common to the Kandinsky paintings, in particular the series he termed *Compositions* allowed Eckbo to

destroy both the axis of the formal garden and the forced naturalism of the English garden tradition. His concern was not for pattern in the ground plan, however, but in the spaces created by the garden's elements. Geometry served spatial creation; vegetation served as sculptural form as well as to soften the solidity of the architectural materials.

More directly addressing the body was the pool for the mid-1950s Cranston garden, also located in Los Angeles. The form of the swimming pool--the garden's dominant feature--at first appears completely wilful--a piece of incised sculptural form intended only as an aesthetic subject. In fact, the design of the pool derived directly from the client's physical limitations: he was bound to the use of the wheelchair, and the pool was intended as a site for physical therapy. The gradual slope of the approach allowed the client to enter and exit the water directly in his chair; the small island created a narrow waterway which was used for upper body development. In the Cranston garden, Eckbo began with the requirements underlying the making of a therapeutic landscape; the biomorphic shape and the staggered walls answered the landscape architect's interest in balancing human, environmental, and aesthetic interests.

For his own family's use, Eckbo constructed the so-called ALCOA garden in Los Angeles at the end of the 1950s.¹⁷ The use of aluminum was widespread in aviation during the war, and one of the material's major producers, ALCOA -the Aluminum Company of America--attempted to redirect military production to the residential sector in the years following the war. In its "Forecast" program, ALCOA commissioned artists and designers to create works of various types executed in some form of aluminum. These ranged from a carpet woven with aluminum fiber to aluminum chairs and glasses to an aluminum garden.

Eckbo took great delight in the shapes, meshes, and colors that anodized aluminum could provide, especially when no maintenance was needed and its color was assumed to be permanent. ALCOA provided the material without charge, and Eckbo selected a series of open meshes, sheeting, and linear elements from which to construct the garden. Screens increased the mystery of spatial depth or provided pergola surfaces upon which vines would grow. The aluminum pyramids that formed a roof extension modulated light while reflecting sunlight in varied patterns. Perhaps the garden's most remarkable--if not its most beautiful--feature was a fountain in the form of a great flower constructed of aluminum plate. No flower quite like it had ever been seen in the garden before. Despite its call for modernity, in many ways, the aluminum elements appeared in traditional ways, that is to say, in forms historically assumed by wood and lattices. The principal pergola with its waving mesh roof, for example, was actually supported on wooden posts. But if some of the forms recalled elements from gardens past, the use of textures and metallic colors in just this way was certainly evidence of the mid-twentieth century and the latest word in garden design.

The aluminum sheeting and meshes of the ALCOA garden are now gone, although perhaps ironically, some parts of the wooden framework have escaped destruction. Most of Eckbo's gardens of the 1950s have unfortunately already disappeared or fallen into disrepair. In some instances, the hardscape--the paving, the retaining walls, the swimming pools, and the pergolas--still exists, but in almost all instances the original planting has been neglected or replaced. There seems to be an axiom which reads: The more extreme and contemporary the landscape design, the faster it will vanish.¹⁸ It appears that garden owners, even California garden owners, seek serenity and comfort in the garden rather than ideas about society and the arts. Perhaps, the third or fourth buyer sees the garden as dated and requiring updating or refurbishing. Perhaps for today's tastes there is too much paving and the swimming pool is far too small. Major structural changes to the house they have just purchased require more effort, more mess, and greater expenditure. In contrast, reworking the planting scheme can be accomplished with a solid weekend's labor and relatively little expenditure. Modern gardens have disappeared far faster than modern houses.

On the whole, Church's gardens have fared far better over the years. His was a softer idiom, more reliant on a relatively restricted planting palette, one that was tested and known to thrive in Northern California. In addition, where land allowed Church tried to maintain an area left more or less natural beyond the garden zone of immediate family use. Few people in California will argue against "nature"--and so the original design remains relatively intact. In many cases, these were gardens for the wealthy, and over time, "garden by Thomas Church" became a cachet and selling point in and of itself, especially on the San Francisco Peninsula, south of the city.

But like Eckbo's gardens, Church's work has also suffered through the years and change in ownership. Considering the vast output by both men, this is quite understandable, of course. The standards for

construction and irrigation have vastly improved since the 1950s: Church's standard detailing for redwood retaining walls and unreinforced concrete paving, for example, would not be acceptable by today's codes. In numerous instances, vegetation in the gardens has grown unchecked, walls have collapsed, and roots have infiltrated paving.¹⁹ But despite these losses, a significant number of Church's most impressive gardens endure. Happily, the magnificent Donnell garden--Church's modernist masterwork--is maintained in flawless condition as testimony not only to Church and company's design, but also to the informed patronage of family members who truly love the garden.

The landscapes I have described represent some of the high points in the modernism of American gardens at midcentury. They represented a free approach to conceiving gardens and a free attitude toward space, vocabulary, maintenance, hygiene, physical activity--and even horticulture. They shared few parallels elsewhere in the world, that is, until the broad publication of the Donnell garden worldwide. Design in the postwar years looked forward to what could be rather than what had been. In its optimism it proposed, realized, and tested ideas about what the new garden should be: not just as a composition of forms and spaces, not only as an equal to innovations in painting, sculpture, and even architecture--but as settings for human occupation. Church told us that "gardens are for people"; and Eckbo, quite wisely, termed these "landscapes for living."

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Notes

1 See Donald Albrecht, ed., *World War II and the American Dream* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

2 For an overview of Church's life and career see "Thomas Dolliver Church," a special issue of *Studies in the History of Gardens and the Designed Landscape*, April-June 2000, edited by Marc Treib; and Dorothee Imbert, "Of Gardens and Houses as Places to Live: Thomas Church and William Wurster," in Marc Treib, ed., *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 114-137.

3 Suzanne B. Riess has compiled an impressive two-volume oral history on Church, his circle, and his times. *Thomas Church, The Bancroft Library*, University of California at Berkeley, 1978.

4 Church's two books, *Gardens Are for People* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1955) and *Your Private World* (San Francisco: Chronicle Publishing, 1962) were essentially collections of articles written for *Sunset*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *House Beautiful*, and other periodicals. *Gardens Are for People* remains in print, its third edition coedited by Grace Hall and Michael Laurie, published by the University of California Press.

5 Church, *Gardens Are for People*, 209.

6 *Ibid.*, 193.

7 Dianne Harris has explored the theme of privacy in "Making Your Private World: Modern Landscape Architecture and House Beautiful," in Marc Treib, *The Architecture of Landscape, 1940-60* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, in press). In a talk to the Press Club at the American Furniture Mart, Chicago, 1953, *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon infused her thoughts on design with the threat posed to American freedom by the wrong (often foreign) architectural style. "We don't believe the International Style is simply a matter of taste; anymore than we believe that Nazism or Communism are matters of taste, matters of opinion, as between two political parties running for election. We say: vote either Nazi or Communist party into office and it is your last election for a long time. Similarly, choose a way of life whose architecture is the International Style and whose philosophy of living is election and you subject yourself to something far beyond a casual change in home fashions." Typescript, Thomas Church Archive, Environmental Design Archives, University of California at Berkeley, 14.

8 See Marc Treib, "Aspects of Regionality and the (Modern) California Garden," in Therese O'Malley and Marc Treib, eds., *Regional Garden Design in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 5-42.

9 Church, *Gardens Are for People*, 53.

10 "The first idea was to use one of the big boulders from the site as a play island in the pond. This was changed (it would have torn the swimmers to pieces) into an island of concrete designed by sculptor Adaline Kent." *Ibid.*, 228.

11 For a survey of Eckbo's biography and career, see Marc Treib and Dorothee Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

12 The plan was produced by Eckbo, Dean Austin and Williams under the supervision of Eckbo's partner Edward A. Williams. *Open Space: The Choices Before California* (San Francisco: Diablo Press, 1969).

13 The sweep of this vision was demonstrated as early as 1950 with the publication of Eckbo's *Landscapes for Living* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce). The content of the book spans from broad issues of the environment to the relation of human beings and nature to the materials of which gardens are made. The issues and proposals remain relevant today.

14 Garrett Eckbo, "Small Gardens in the City," *Pencil Points* (September, 1937): 573-586.

15 See Dorothee Imbert, "The Art of Social Landscape Design," in Treib and Imbert, *Garrett Eckbo*, especially 115-143.

16 I have discussed this theme in *ibid.*, 59-67.

17 *Ibid.*, 84-92.

18 For a discussion of the issues facing the preservation of modern period gardens, see Charles Birnbaum, "Preserving and Interpreting the Landscape Legacy of Thomas Dolliver Church," in Treib, ed., *Church issue, Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, April-June, 2000.

19 See Ron Herman, "[Re]Working with Thomas Church," Treib, ed., *Church issue, Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* (April-June, 2000).