

2005 Banks Memorial Lecture: Gardens that involve people

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An examination of how Hamilton Gardens involve both the casual visitor and the local community.

September is not a particularly busy time at Hamilton Gardens, but in the week that this article was written plenty of things were going on. The Pakeke Lions were renovating a traditional gardener's potting shed that they have sponsored. The Friends of Hamilton Gardens were manning the Information Centre and providing guides for four organised tours and a couple of school groups. Groups from the Friends and the Chrysanthemum Society have been propagating plants in the Nursery. There have been daily meetings involving trusts set up to organise events at Hamilton Gardens, the next being the Hispanic celebration of spring. A class of WINTEC students have been gaining practical experience out in the gardens. There were two-dozen pre-booked events, well down on the weekly average of nearly forty. Builders have been working on the Indian Char Bagh Garden and the Chinoiserie Pavilion sponsored by the Indian Char Bagh Garden Trust and the Friends respectively. And despite the winter weather there have still been plenty of visitors.

Even during the quiet winter months these diverse activities provide life to the site and directly involve the community in their gardens. Many of the projects mentioned are consciously planned to help promote the development and use of Hamilton Gardens. I don't know how we compare to other gardens but Hamilton Gardens have developed a reputation for involving the community and casual visitor and

this is the aspect I have been asked to explain in this Banks Memorial Lecture.

A recent survey of American public gardens by Goodwin and Skelly (2004) from Cornell University identified the five most successful ways in which strong links have been developed between gardens and their communities and these provide some useful headings – utilizing existing communities of interest, partnerships with adjacent or related organisations, encouraging a direct community of interest, becoming a destination for other activities and, what they refer to as 'a narrative to encourage the movement of visitors'. The last category I have referred to simply as 'engaging the casual visitor' and it needs a little more explanation than the other categories.

Existing communities of interest

Utilizing existing communities of interest has always been a successful strategy at Hamilton Gardens. Initially this was focused on local horticultural groups. The Herb, Rose and Camellia Societies helped develop those respective gardens and representatives from the main horticultural groups formed an independent trust to raise funds to build the Hamilton Gardens Pavilion. Over the past twenty years, many of these horticultural groups have declined or wound up so that horticultural shows and lectures unfortunately now make up less than 3% of the Pavilion's users.

Partnerships

The most successful partnerships have been those involving local cultural communities. The Chinese community became very involved in the Chinese Scholar's Garden



Fig. 1 The Trust that oversaw the development and fundraising for the new Indian Char Bagh Garden was made up of leaders from each of the different regional and religious community groups represented in the city.

through the Chinese Garden Trust, as did the New Zealand Russian community in a Russian Bell Tower project. Other examples include the Japanese Garden Trust, French Rose Garden Trust, the Hispanic Cultural Committee and the American Modernist Garden Trust. At present most of the different groups within the local Indian community have been involved in the trust which is helping to develop the Indian Char Bagh Garden. This Trust was deliberately made up of leaders from each of the different regional and religious communities and like the Chinese Garden Trust it has provided a catalyst for further dialog between those groups. However, most of the involvement by cultural groups has been through events and performances,

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which are also an effective way of bringing new visitors to Hamilton Gardens.

The difficulty with the involvement of cultural groups is that some people perceive it as just a flag waving exercise where their country must be represented by something at least as grand as their rival nations. It is sometimes hard for people to understand that just because we have a Japanese Garden we cannot have an eight-storey windmill or an ancient temple. The theme of Hamilton Gardens is not intended to be some form of United Nations theme park; it is actually 'the story of gardens'. Around the world there are many collections of gardens or plants from different countries or sister cities but we are not aware of another major garden that has a similar broad historic theme.

It will always be a struggle to maintain the integrity of this historic theme particularly in a political environment. However, we have one valuable tool that to date has generally avoided a free-for-all. The Hamilton Gardens Management Plan and its reviews have become high-level council policy documents. They involve the public in consultation and broaden their thinking beyond individual interests. Once approved, the plan provides a framework within which development, maintenance specifications, and community use and involvement can occur.

For the American researchers mentioned earlier, the most successful partnerships were with adjacent landowners, such as art galleries and local parkways. Our most important partner is the Waikato Institute of Technology (WINTERC) Horticultural Education Centre, which is located within Hamilton Gardens. Students use the Gardens as a practical teaching resource, WINTERC maintains the large Kitchen Garden and we are working on joint initiatives to encourage more people to consider careers in amenity horticulture.

A community of interest

Direct community involvement in the Gardens does take longer to develop but it is obviously less likely to move on. We have now reached a stage where Hamilton Gardens has its own community of interest and certainly there is a lot of general community ownership. Recently, a tornado ripped through the upper portion of Hamilton Gardens destroying or damaging



Fig. 2 A roster of about sixty members of the Friends of Hamilton Gardens have attended the Visitor Information Centre every day for the past decade. The Friends also keep a roster of about two dozen trained tour guides.



Fig. 3 The Sustainable Backyard Garden has been developed and is still maintained by the Hamilton Permaculture Trust. Trust members also provide open days and school training programmes.

more than two hundred trees and many more shrubs and herbaceous plants. Members of the Friends and passing members of the public all helped with the clean up.

The main focus for community involvement is the Friends of Hamilton Gardens who have attended the Information Centre every day for the past decade and have two dozen trained tour guides available. They also have other groups who call themselves the 'deadheads' (deadheading roses and camellias), 'spotters'

(who clean plant labels and record those that are missing) and the 'RAUFs' (Friends who propagate Rare and Unusual plants).

Over the past seven years the Permaculture Trust has maintained the Sustainable Backyard Garden and for more than twenty years the Chrysanthemum and Dahlia Societies have propagated and tended their own special display beds.

There is a perception that community involvement in Hamilton Gardens has been particularly successful but I am not clear that there is any magic formula. It helps having a product that local people are proud of and a successful track record that gives those supporting a project, like a new garden, confidence in the outcome. It is easy for community enthusiasm to be wasted and it is important to define boundaries and to be clear about the wider objectives. In my limited discussions with other institutions there would appear to be a direct correlation between the relationship between professional staff and volunteers and the success and extent of community involvement. A key to our achievement is probably as simple as respecting and enjoying the hard work, support and the enthusiasm that volunteers bring to each project.

Destination for other activities

Originally there was no conscious strategy to promote Hamilton Gardens as an event venue, but without doubt it has increased community and visitor involvement and promoted awareness of the Gardens and its features. Amongst the nearly two thousand events held at Hamilton Gardens each year about fifty are organised primarily to promote awareness of Hamilton Gardens or features within it. Some of these events attract large crowds and they certainly add another dimension to the Gardens. Many regular visitors now expect something to be going on all of the time, such as a wedding in the gardens or an exhibition of some kind in the Pavilion.



Fig. 4 The most memorable events at Hamilton Gardens are those that relate to the theme of a particular garden. For example, during the Summer Festival in 2005, the Hamilton Gardens Opera Company performed the opera *Lakme* in the new Indian Char Bagh Garden.

The events that many people value most are those that relate to the theme of a particular area or garden. For example, a Chinese lantern festival with dragon dances in the Chinese Scholar's Garden or a cooking demonstration in the Herb Garden. The most memorable events at the annual Hamilton Gardens Summer Festival over the past eight years have been those that have utilized a setting in this way. Examples include *Madam Butterfly* set in the Japanese Garden, a Venetian play set in the Medici Court, Morris dancers in the English Garden, Japanese drummers in the Japanese Garden, Indian dancers, musicians and Bollywood singers in the Indian Char Bagh Garden, an Italian Opera in the Italian Renaissance Garden and an American jazz concert in the American Modernist Garden. Some dances and plays have even been written specifically for a particular setting in Hamilton Gardens, such as a dance about Marilyn Munroe (American Modernist Garden) and an Indian comedy (Char Bagh Garden).

The Hamilton Gardens Summer Festival Foundation is just one of several trusts set up to organise events in Hamilton Gardens. From simple beginnings, the Festival has grown to become the region's premier arts festival involving about sixty events, fifty thousand patrons

and a cast of thousands. Last year, more than a thousand people voted for the best of the world's new roses at the Pacific Rose Bowl Festival, an event that is now attracting international

recognition. The Garden Opera Company organises an annual opera in the Gardens, while the Hamilton Gardens Entertainment Trust organises an annual Turtle Lake Concert that involves several dozen performers. People affiliated with South America celebrate an Hispanic Spring Festival organised by a group set up specifically for that purpose. Another trust has been established to organise the annual Hamilton Gardens Sculpture Symposium, an event that involves curious visitors in a direct way.

Engaging the casual visitor

Tourism New Zealand recently undertook a study of visitors to New Zealand to identify the key elements of a good and memorable experience of this country. A key element was 'engagement' – engagement with people, stories, interpretation and even some degree of exertion or discomfort all became crucial elements of their 'good experiences'. I would argue that gardens are no different and while Hamilton Gardens is not an outstanding example this is an area we have had to study in order to recreate historic garden traditions with some degree of integrity. In general terms this interaction between the garden and the visitor can be broken down into the three areas of physical, intellectual and subliminal engagement.

The least popular parts of Hamilton Gardens are those that are similar to many botanic gardens. A wide path winds across lawns filled with trees and a few shrub borders. You could drive through there in a car and even walking you could

almost imagine yourself enclosed in a car looking to the right then left as you glide along. However, the most popular parts of Hamilton Gardens are those where we treat the visitor in a much less dignified manner. In the theme gardens we force them into dark, narrow passages, not knowing what they might find around the next corner. There are mysterious doors they are not able to enter, various devices are used to slow their progress and we trick them into returning to the place from where they started. On busy weekends they are deliberately crowded into narrow lanes and we generally try to mystify, distract and disorientate them. In short, the garden design attempts to engage the visitor and it is certainly not like driving along inside a car, or for that matter, in a tourist bus.

There is also the more intellectual engagement through some thought-provoking trigger or by telling stories. At Hamilton Gardens we are lucky that the theme of the story of gardens can be enlarged with the stories associated with each garden. Not many of these are clearly signposted and articulated, but the foundations are in place for them to emerge. In the Rogers Rose Garden for example the theme is the story of the rose that starts with a collection of species roses and finishes with a selection of the world's best new roses that are judged each year. In between those points are rose stories that are yet to be interpreted, such as the roses collected by Empress Josephine and the rose breeding stories of Jean Baptiste Guillot and Francis Meiland. It is not just a collection of roses; it has different layers of meaning and a collection of stories that will engage those with the time to pause.

Our Solar Calendar or a maze can engage the visitor on a more intellectual level but traditionally this has been achieved in gardens through the use of thought-provoking garden inscriptions. Roman inscriptions made reference to ideas and memories. Song Dynasty Chinese scholars



Fig. 5 At Hamilton Gardens visitors are deliberately crowded into narrow lanes and passages never knowing what they might find around the next corner.

favoured inscriptions that referred to new insights and surrealist associations, whereas the 18th Century Europeans preferred philosophical reflections. Thought provoking inscriptions appear to be enjoying some degree of revival, especially in France, largely driven by outdoor modern art, which is also intended to challenge our perception of the world.

There is a field of scholarship known as 'Reception Studies' that examines how people respond to arts like music, painting, poetry, film, theatre, literature and architecture. While these studies don't appear to have ever addressed gardens, they do identify 'reception theories' which are equally applicable to gardens. For example they identify two fields with German names: 'Rezeption' and 'Wirkung'. 'Rezeption' is an individual's judgement, the intended message or what a work 'says' to the visitor. An example of this is the story we are trying to tell about the development of the modern rose in the Roger's Rose Garden.

The second category, called 'Wirkung', refers to a more subliminal response within the viewers themselves. Some Waikato University students

recently surveyed the response of Asian visitors to Hamilton Gardens (Mathew et al., 2004) and in the process they identified some examples of these subliminal reactions. Asian visitors apparently like the enclosed gardens where they are crowded on busy weekends and they considered visits to the Chinese and Japanese Gardens to be a spiritual experience reminding them of home. The gardener who looks after our Japanese Garden reports that Japanese visitors sometimes break down in tears when they enter that garden.

This form of dynamic interaction or *Wirkung* is the most difficult aspect of visitor engagement to explain but I think it is significant. The early twentieth century French novelist, Marcel Proust pointed out that the imagination can only engage that which is absent. What he was saying is that sometimes the most poignant qualities of a garden come not from what is actually there but from what is missing.

Engaging the visitor's imagination is an area where we can still learn a lot from traditional Chinese and Japanese gardens. In the design of their gardens the Japanese masters refer to its two sides; that which is real and that which is sensed. They use devices such as miniaturisation or abstraction to stimulate the imaginative side. An example of miniaturisation is the symbolic headlands, mountains and gorges in a scroll garden represented around the pond in the Japanese Garden at Hamilton Gardens. Our Zen Garden is an example of abstraction where the raked gravel and rocks are intended to represent swirling water at a river mouth, islands and shoreline. A common example of abstraction in the Chinese Gardens are the Taihu rocks which are used to stimulate the viewer's imagination and are often named to prompt images of 'fabulous' clouds, animals or mountains. Taihu rocks are Chinese scholar's rocks traditionally from Lake Tai, Jiangsu province.

The Chinese and Japanese garden traditions place a lot of emphasis on natural associations like scent and sensory experiences, particularly those that are abstract or absent in order to provoke the imagination. In our Chinese Scholar's Garden the 'Moon and Lily Pond' is intended to invoke a still, summer, moonlit evening and the 'Blossom Court' conjures up images of spring. The name 'Wind in the Pines Lookout' is probably more provocative on a still day and I am still not sure what you are supposed to imagine on the 'Island of Whispering Birds'. Important guests visiting Chinese gardens were often invited to name or compose a poem about an object or a view. To do this successfully they had to approach their subject in an inventive or obtuse way that would provoke a particular sensitivity or a resonance through some unexpected association. Once again they were drawing attention to something that was absent in order to engage the imagination.

A Japanese equivalent is the haiku or tanka poetry about our Japanese Garden. A competition was held that attracted more than 500 entries from Japan and New Zealand, which have all been printed in a book (Henshall and Riach, 1998). The winning entries are inscribed on plaques within the garden itself. Within a set number of syllables, a short verse tries to capture the essence of a scene or to evoke a new perception or association. For example, some of the poems ask you to 'listen to the silence' or to imagine the spirit of the rocks or one hand clapping, or to imagine the garden covered in snow or the autumn leaves waltzing with each other in the breeze. One winning entry drew attention to the dreamlike patterns reflected from the pond onto the ceiling of the pavilion.

As discussed, the best Japanese and Chinese gardens typically engage our imagination by referring to something that is missing. Most of the world's successful western gardens also do this in some way, even if it is done unconsciously.



Fig. 6 Tour guides at Hamilton Gardens are encouraged to tell stories and capture the imagination of visitors. For example, they might refer to their own experience of a performance of Shakespeare on a warm summer evening in the Rose Garden.

Giveny in Rouen, France is said to be the world's most visited small garden. But it would not have even survived if it were not associated with the impressionist painter, Claude Monet. The crowds come in their tens of thousands every year because of this invisible association that can capture their imagination.

Many garden designers throughout the ages have recognised the value of this historic association and have introduced it artificially. For example, the artificial ruins of Greek temples and grottoes in the 18th Century English gardens were intended to provoke classical scenes and sacred mysteries. Gardens, like the famous Zen garden of Ryan-ji in Japan, that hint at some sacred significance are extremely effective in capturing the imagination. Italian Renaissance gardens were usually based on geometric theories that mysteriously hinted at a wider cosmic plan, just like Stonehenge and the medieval cathedrals.

There are of course diverse ways to engage the visitor's imagination. Our tour guides are asked to paint a picture of how the Indian Char Bagh Garden might have been used by the Mughal princes or refer to something like their own experience of performance of Shakespeare on a warm summer evening in the Rogers Rose Garden. Other prompts to engage the visitor's imagination at Hamilton

Gardens are more straightforward. In the central theme gardens there are doors through hedges and garden walls that visitors cannot enter. Most are actually doors to maintenance areas but we

hope that they might, at least subconsciously, challenge the visitor to imagine what lies behind the door or in the next unreachable courtyard.

If you are in any doubt about the importance of engaging the garden visitor's imagination then consider the enterprising Waikato farmer who charges tourists fifty dollars each to look at some theatrical props left on his farm. It is an extremely successful local attraction but it would be nothing if it did not engage the imagination of the visitor with the vision of a Hobbit village and perhaps the filming of *Lord of the Rings*.

Conclusion

Most of the surveys of visitors to major gardens that I have seen suggest that whether we like it or not, few visitors actually come to look at specific plants or a particular plant collection. Even feeding the ducks can often take precedence. In larger public gardens we no longer have the indulgence of collecting and growing plants for our own amusement. There is an increasing requirement to pursue a particular purpose and provide a particular message, such as an appreciation of plants or the ecosystems they represent. To get that message across we must first plan to engage the visitor intellectually, physically, and if possible subliminally. Just as a good teacher will interact with their pupils, a good garden needs to engage its visitor. The more ways and levels at which it does this the more likely it is to reward return visits. I have only given a handful of examples, but most of the

world's successful gardens engage their visitor using tools as varied as association, abstraction, insight or by telling stories.

Initially community involvement in the development and promotion of Hamilton Gardens was simply driven by our ambitions exceeding the budget but there is no doubt that the results add a special dimension to the Gardens. That wider involvement, the designs that try to engage the visitor together with a constant programme of events all contribute to the energy and dynamics of Hamilton Gardens and hopefully engage both the community and casual visitor.

References

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