

The international  
magazine for  
landscape  
architecture  
and urbanism

2011 / 2

# 'scape

*Dossier* **Under Control** Words of power / The European Landscape Convention / Delta Discoveries / Spanish drivers / A Green Grid in London / Thomas Sieverts' life lab / Essay: Stop waisting urban space / Metropolitan Gardens in Osaka, New York and Lettele



Duham Coast



# Metropolitan Gardens

What is a garden? What is a metropolis? Isn't the one the opposite of the other? Rather than sticking to old-fashioned dichotomies, in this issue of 'scape, we propose to draw together and intermix the small-scale and the large-scale dimensions of the environment we all live in today – and in which, even if we lack a proper name for it, we are continuously creating spaces: let it just be these every-day landscapes that we call metropolitan gardens here.

This environment we all live in today is obviously no longer a garden, especially if we trace back the origin of the word to paradise, the garden of ancient Persian culture. It is no longer a city either, as this name evokes too many associations of the era of classical cities so that urban planners like Tom Sieverts (see portrait page 42) started calling it differently in order to make us aware of having entered a new epoch. The original German title of his seminal book *Zwischenstadt* of 1997, a neologism that literally translates into 'in-between-city', highlights interstices as the new urban realm. Its first English translation, named *Cities without Cities*, plays out the denial of the old term 'city' without coming up with a new suggestion. The title of a recently revised and annotated English edition proposes a pragmatic positioning instead of a new term: *Where we live now*. In our present reviews of metropolitan gardens we want to rely on this pragmatism and observe how designers deal with where we live now and how they cultivate interstices. We have selected three outstanding in-between small-scale projects from the large-scale regions of New York, Osaka and Overijssel. By including two urban and one rural project we also want to foster the understanding of where we live now as a metropolitan environment made up of relationships and dynamics rather than spatial typologies. The area we stubbornly keep calling countryside is part of where we live now – beholding it as countryside excludes it from being reflected in our considerations, whereas viewing it with fresh eyes as a space related to whoever occupies it and whatever surrounds it opens up almost endless perspectives for creating new metropolitan uses and spaces.

Indeed, the term 'metropolis' might mislead us as well, reflecting the spatial dimension and

centrality of where we live now all too easily. In his book *Métapolis, ou l'Avenir des villes* ('Metapolis, or the future of the cities') of 1995, the French economist and urban researcher Francois Ascher situates our living environments *beyond* ('meta') any kind of city we have experienced so far, arising from the continuous process of metropolization which has been characterized by concentrating human, cultural and material resources within and around the most important urban agglomerations. These metropolises are recognizable primarily from their spatial expansion, discontinuity, heterogeneity and multi-polarity – a description that Ascher shares with Sieverts and many other contemporary theoreticians of the urban realm – but he further defines them as the spatial results of a new form of society which he addresses as the 'hypertext society'. He claims that the way today's individuals perceive and compose their lives and their immediate environments has fundamentally changed from a socially and spatially predefined one-dimensional stability into individually and spatially selectable options and combinations in *n* dimensions ('hyper' in the mathematical sense). In linguistics, a hypertext describes an undefined number of texts in which the same word appears in different syntaxes and meanings. Ascher accordingly sets the individual as a word and its various social contexts as the variety of texts the word is part of, in ever changing constellations. If we have in mind Ascher's individual within his or her *n*-dimensional contexts as the drivers of our metropolitan spaces, then we might get along for a while with calling where we live now a metropolis.

It is a common preconception that top-down procedures apply to the large-scale planning of our metropolises – this might have been the case in selected European cities in times of autocratic rule, and also in the Western cities after WWII, a period of unprecedented growth and calculable future. However, today's metropolises in Europe and other parts of the Western world face both stagnation (if not shrink) and uncertain destinies. In Japan, as we shall see from our reviewed project, contemporary metropolises simply escape top-down planning. The market seems to be imposing itself as the strongest driver all over the planet. Parallel to this, there have always been private

bottom-up initiatives for creating small-scale spaces in the city, let us call them gardens, and they have always been integrated into public planning procedures, even if to a varying extent and for various reasons: allotment gardens, vegetable and flower beds, pots on terraces, arranged balconies, planted rooftops and courtyards, possibly green facades and cultivated window sills. In the light of this long-standing tradition it is all the more astonishing what a hype is being made of urban gardening these days, which is claimed to be an instrument of empowerment for urban citizens, with handcrafted vegetable gardens as expressions of a new self-determined anti-consumerist way of urban life. If classical vegetable gardens and gardening activities are presented under the label of 'Carrot City', 'Gardenurbia' or 'Green Guerrilla' they seem to be identified as the new driving forces of a revolutionary bottom-up, integrative and multicultural urban planning. In actual fact, this DIY-garden mania opens the door for the urban planning authorities to comfortably sneak out of the field of urban open space planning and maintenance that cost them a great deal and to offload them with the greatest pleasure onto all these self-fulfilling private initiatives – as just another outsourcing move that fits well into the contemporary neoliberal climate. Strange to observe that clever professionals are fascinated by community action on cucumber and beetroot beds and believe that this develops better urban structures than if they had been planned. There are alternatives, though, combining metropolitan structure and garden individuality.

The metropolitan gardens presented in this issue of 'scape support the idea that every single square metre of well organized outdoor space enriches our lives considerably if shaped with inspiration, particular knowledge and in line with the bigger picture of where we live now. Here, one may cultivate potatoes or not: the vegetables are irrelevant. What is important is the undogmatic and creative interplay of spatial and social structures with the professional and individual inventivity that has made these gardens possible.

Lisa Diedrich



## REVIEW

*Landscape Architect* **terrain-nyc landscape architecture PC**

*terrain* **Steven Tupu, Liz Campbell Kelly, Kurt Martig**

*Location* **Union Square Neighbourhood, New York, NY 10003, USA**

*Area size* **1,300 m<sup>2</sup>**

*Design Started* **October 2008**

*Realization* **October 2010**

*Client/Owner* **The Chelsea Lane Condominium Board**

*Architect* **Thomas Fenniman Architect / Chris Rome**

*General Contractor* **Skyline Restoration / Stephan Andreatos**

*Landscape Contractor* **Botanic Landscapes / Lem Hegwood**

*Landscape Irrigation* **Lifesource / Declan Keane**

*Gala Soil* **Gala Institute - Soil Scientist - Paul Mankiewicz**

On the subject of cities, the design conversation is dominated by discussions of public open space - the parks and plazas, large and small - that host all manner of activities for the urban dweller. And while these public open spaces form the underlying network throughout the city, private open space is an equally important ingredient in the mix: they are used just as imaginatively and creatively as the city's great parks. In more private settings, urban dwellers have learned to carve out their own slices of open space from whatever is available - from backyard formal gardens to mini vegetable pots and small grilles on fire escapes.

In the case of terrain's *Urban Forest*, the private open space is a 1200 m<sup>2</sup> shared garden for the *Chelsea Lane*, a cooperative apartment building. The garden, constructed on top of the building's parking

garage, was a renovation of an existing underused space. The apartment complex spans a full city block - from 15th to 16th streets in Manhattan, just west of Union Square. The courtyard garden is sandwiched between two separate buildings that form the co-op, joined by a glass atrium that bisects the garden.

In conversation with Steven Tupu, principal, he described the forest concept for the site as originating from the distinct conditions of light and space. As an internal courtyard sandwiched between the two 14-storey buildings, the site receives primarily indirect sunlight, suggesting at ground level the soft light of the forest floor. The overall spatial configuration of the tall and narrow internal space also led Tupu to the strong verticals of the forest condition. The designed landscape

# An urban forest for New York high-rise







The *Urban Forest* is constructed on top of the building's parking garage.

is distilled into clear elements, which when combined form a richly layered space that functions as a whole. The forest floor is planar and textural, formed by river stone. Rooted above this ground plane are islands of forest plantings contained by a sinuous cast-stone curb. A pathway floats through the landscape, leading the eye through the garden and suggesting the importance of experiencing it through walking.

The modulation of experience of the Urban

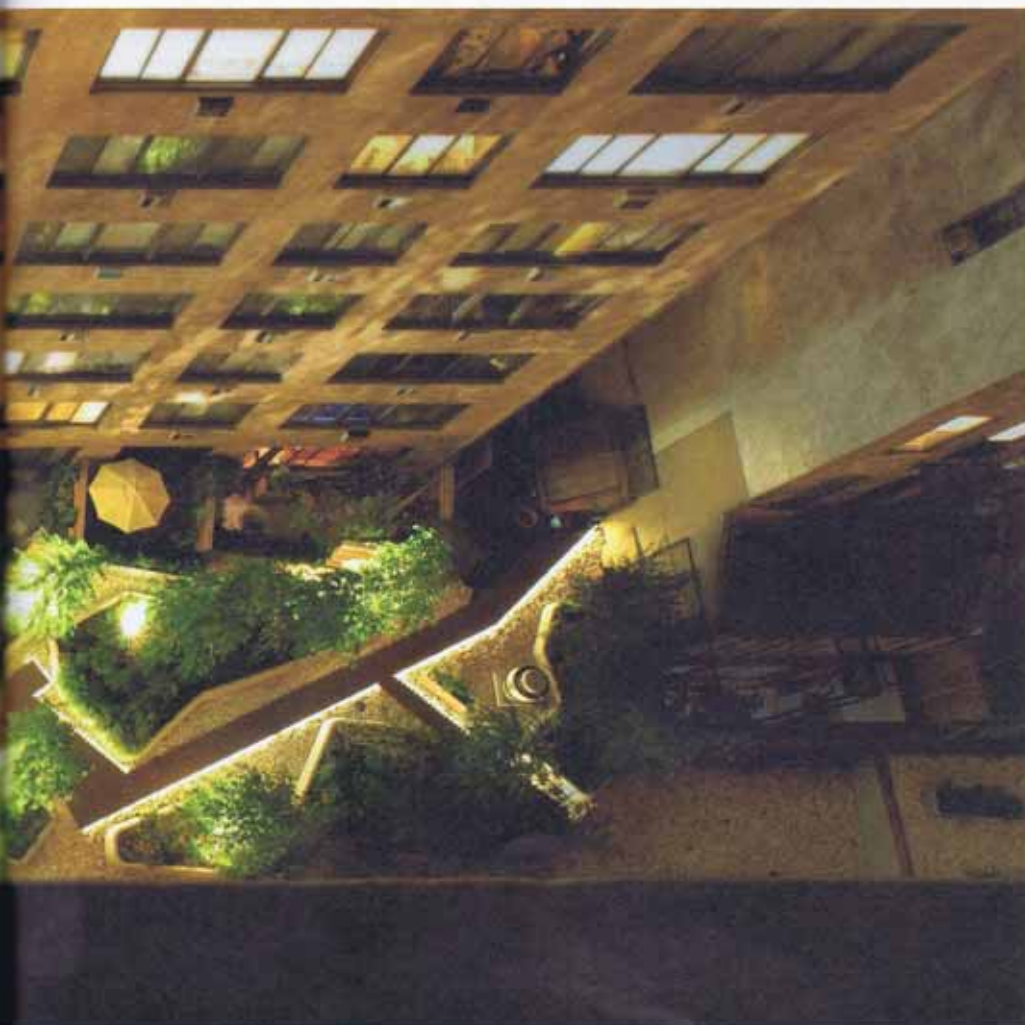
Forest shifts between the immersive and physical, to the image-based and refracted, displaying the complexity and depth of the garden. The multiple perspectives are formed from walking on the pathways, to passing through the garden in the glass atrium and to imaged views from the apartment windows looking down. Unlike many projects where the plan view cannot be perceived because there is only the ground-level experience, at the *Urban Forest* this shift between the ground and the higher level becomes an important part of how the site is

experienced as a whole. Walking through the atrium is immersive yet remote. The zigzagged glass of the atrium creates the effect of a refracted picture plane, forming distinct snapshots of the garden as one passes through.

The experience of the site transforms yet again after dark. LED strip lights on the underside of the paths further emphasize the plan view from above and at ground level contribute to the sense that the paths are floating. The lighting activates the urban quality of the space, with the surrounding apartments contributing to the energy and experience of the garden. Tupu also explains how the lighting effects at night create an inverse experience from the day in the lobby space. In the day, there is a feeling of separation from the landscape outside - that one is glimpsing into a special garden space. At night this experience is inverted. The equal light levels on the inside of the atrium and the garden outside give the sense that one is immersed in the garden from within the atrium.

The planting for the site reinforces the forest concept, with ground covers, an understory shrub layer, and a canopy layer. The experience of the planting is textural. Walking through the glass atrium opens views to the *Urban Forest*, and allows for proximity to the forest floor plantings - the rich and delicate textures of the low plants, including *Helleborus* sp., *Heuchera* 'Pewter Veil', *Hakonechloa macra* 'Albo Striata', and several ferns (Northern Maidenhair, Christmas and Ostrich). The understory shrub layer includes light and airy shrubs with varied leaf shapes and colourations, such as *Clethra alnifolia*, *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Arnold Promise', *Fothergilla gardenii* and *viburnums* - *Viburnum plicatum tomentosum* and *Viburnum rhytidophyllum*. The canopy plants are likewise formed by graceful specimens - single stem birch trees, *Betula Jacquemontii* 'Himalayan Birch' and Japanese maples, *Acer palmatum*, which have been salvaged from the site.

Built on structure, the *Urban Forest* project posed technical challenges. The garage roof had a load







The solution for the garden in *Chelsea Lane* is a modular curb system that forms sinuously curving large planting areas that can support large soil volumes.

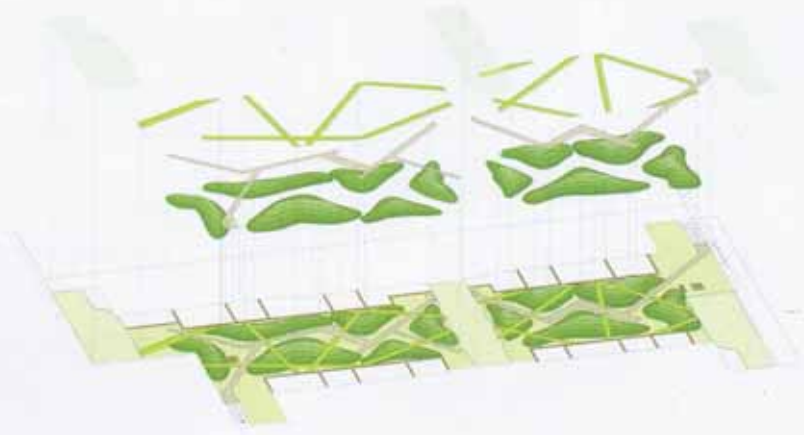


maximum that could potentially limit planting and the roof waterproofing had to remain integral without any penetrations. Additionally, any design had to incorporate protrusions from existing building mechanical equipment. To respond to these challenges, terrain devised a systematic design solution that could solve the problems at the *Chelsea Lane* and had the potential to be deployed at other urban sites, often retrofits built on an existing structure. The solution, now being patented, is a modular curb system that forms sinuously curving large planting areas that can support large soil volumes and, therefore, large trees without exceeding weight limits. The system has flexible geometry and is self-supporting - allowing the planting areas to bypass all protrusions, and the roof waterproofing to remain intact. The modules consist of cast stone and have straight pieces of 4' (122 cm) lengths and corner pieces of a fixed radius but several different lengths. This system creates a robust technical solution that rethinks the way that plants can exist on roofs, terraces and other urban structural conditions. The system allows for large planting areas and large plant material without relying on off-the-shelf containers that are rarely big enough to create the massing that is required for an immersive landscape experience.

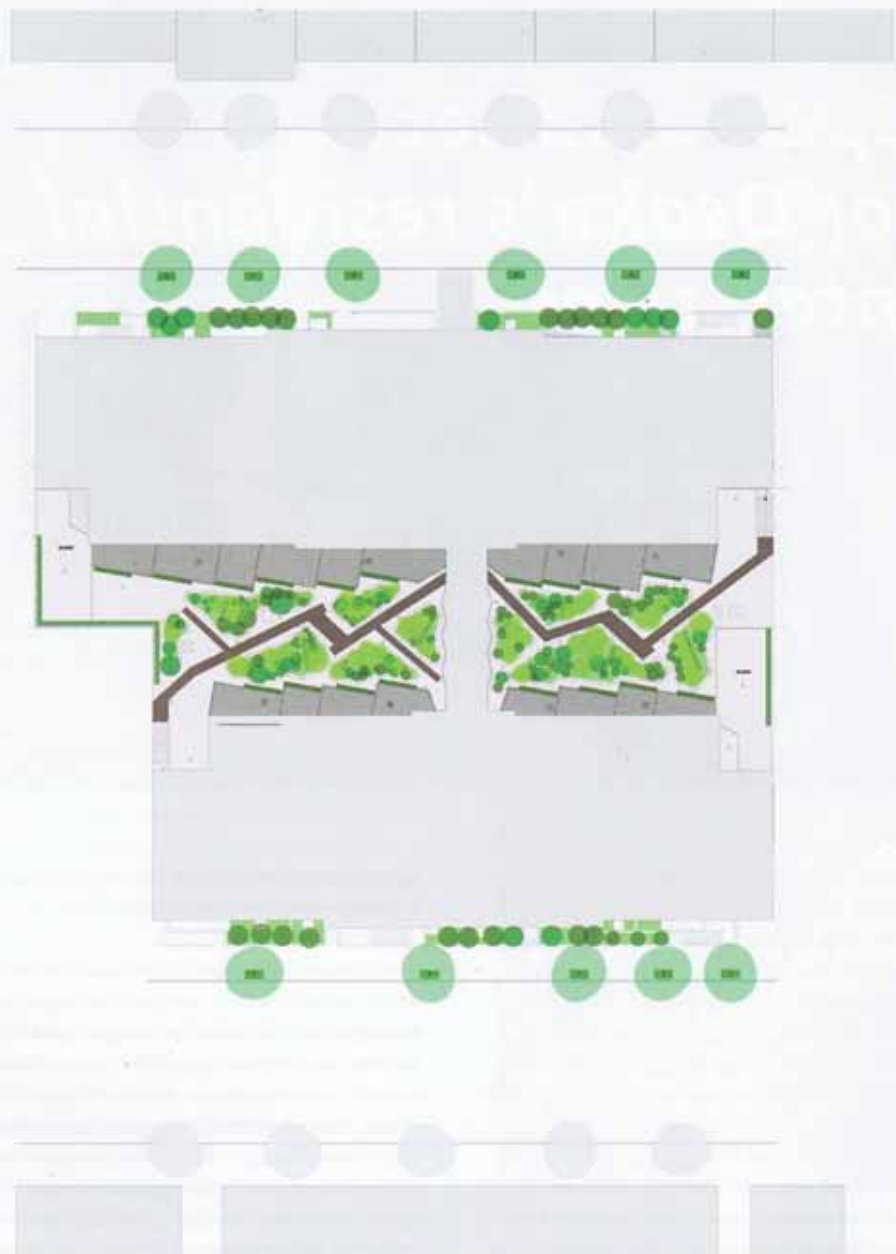
Terrain seeks systematic approaches to landscape, both in finding modular solutions that can be applied to projects across many scales and in viewing their work as linked networks of open space. The firm uses these solutions to rethink how leftover, under-used urban spaces can be occupied by landscape, and how people can occupy these hidden spaces. At the *Chelsea Lane*, the co-op board has started to re-think a long-standing policy that limits access to the courtyard. Already they are planning events with live music to take place there and the building's annual meetings. In this way, the *Urban Forest* negotiates a space between private and public, seen by a limited population, but re-imagined and used in ways suggested by the design, actualized by the residents who have incorporated the landscape into the way they live.

Liz Campbell Kelly  
Photos Javier Haddad

Liz Campbell Kelly is a New York based landscape architect and critic who worked at terrain from 2007 to 2009 and is now a designer at Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architecture. She is co-founder and editor of *topophilia.org*, an online journal of landscape architecture and related fields.



The various layers in the design for the Urban Forest of *Chelsea Lane*.



Streetplan and design for *Chelsea Lane*.