# The Meaning of Gardens

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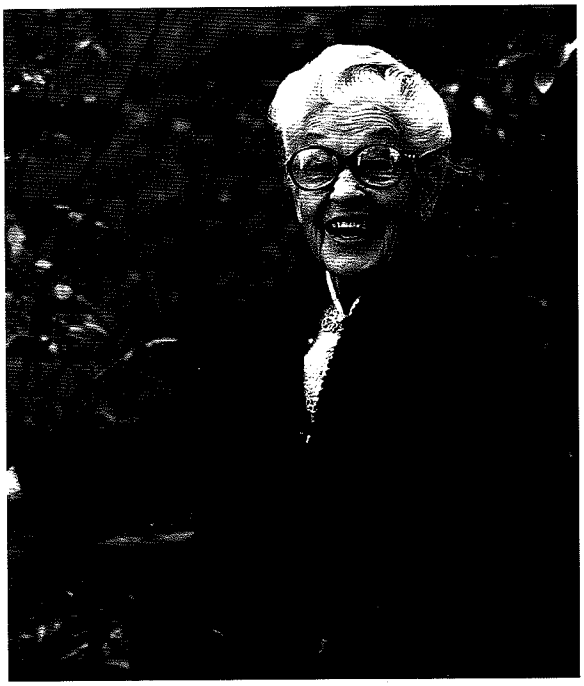
# Grace Marchant and the Global Garden

Gray Brechin



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**25-1**
Grace in her garden, Telegraph Hill, San Francisco [Larry Habegger]

**25-2**
Memorial plaque at Grace Marchant Garden [Mark Francis]

**25-3**
Detail of Grace Marchant Garden [Michael Boland]

Climb the steep Filbert Street stairs from Levi Plaza on San Francisco's Telegraph Hill and you'll come to a wooden bench with a small brass plaque that reads "I have a feeling that we're not in Kansas any more . . ." From where you stand, that classic specimen of MGM understatement applies to the view *in* as much as *out;* below lies the sweeping spectacle of San Francisco Bay with its heavy maritime traffic and the cities that encircle it. But you are also entering a more intimate space, one of equally spectacular close-ups, a growing legacy of warmth and serenity left behind by a woman who died in 1982. The Grace Marchant Gardens should be a lesson to us all about how to save the larger spectacle by caring for the closer one.

Grace Marchant will never be remembered as a Hollywood stuntwoman, an RKO wardrobe mistress, or a dockyard worker, all of which she was before retiring to Filbert and Napier Lane in 1949. Filbert Street here is one of those places where the speculative grid imposed on San Francisco's billowing topography was defeated by the quarry face of Telegraph Hill's eastern flank; incapable of being a street, it acquiesces to wooden stairs.

Grace was sixty-three then, and the trash-strewn, weed-grown right-of-way outside her window bothered her. She set about hauling the bedsprings, tires, and lumber to the cliff and dumping them over the side. Without asking anyone at City Hall, she began conditioning the sandstone outcropping. Over the next thirty-three years, she cultivated a garden that has attained world fame and created a community of the cottages and apartments around it. The garden attracted wildlife and people to what had been an urban wasteland. Like many good gardeners, she was a healer as well as an artist; this otherwise obscure woman added her own substantial increment to that precious artifice that we call civilization.

The garden shrank as Grace's infirmities increased with age. In her last years, she gradually recruited her neighbor, Gary Kray, as helper and unsuspecting apprentice. By the time she died at the age of ninety-six, Kray had learned gardening. Her creation passed on to him.

Under Kray's care, the garden has expanded and become even richer with the addition of thousands of plants donated by the city and well-wishers. The Halloween festival, when Kray decorates the garden with hundreds of lit pumpkins, draws

huge crowds and imbues the place with extra magic. In fact, things are happening in Grace's garden that have no business going on in San Francisco at all; the place grows banana palms and a flock of parrots has taken up residence with the finches and sparrows. Grace's ashes are buried there, and Kray says that he feels her spirit "coming up with the roses." That spirit was apparently strong enough to inspire San Franciscans to launch a fund drive to buy out a developer who planned to build a house in the garden.

Grace has more to teach us. A larger piece of real estate than Filbert Street is in urgent need of comparable care. If you step back 500 miles, you will see the marbled and mobile globe of the earth beneath you. Stretched around it is that thin membrane of life we call the biosphere. At any moment, unseen rivers of birds and fish are coursing its surface; its forests and phytoplankton are exhaling oxygen into the skies, its boiling clouds are combining continents and seas with rain. A little uncustomary humility is called for; our immensely complex technology is simplistic when compared with the far greater complexity of the systems that maintain life here. Our most sophisticated computers only begin to explain the climate.

These interlocking and mutually reinforcing systems maintain stability and constitute the planet's immune system. Yet, as in certain individuals today, something is going drastically wrong. Everywhere, those systems are under virulent attack, and a process of negative feedback is well under way.

The environmental and economic crises that now wrack the planet—ozone depletion, dying rivers, seas, and forests, the insidious spread of radioactivity, and the rising price of nearly everything—are the accumulated interest on 5,000 years of exploitive civilization. Yet because civilization has many valued attributes, the costs involved in raising the facade that hides exploitation are seldom recognized. Unable to locate the problem, we are helpless to find solutions.

Another garden can represent that facade. Famous in its time as one of the most luxuriantly landscaped estates on the San Francisco Peninsula, the garden created by William Barron at Menlo Park was modeled on those of the European nobility. Rare specimen plants were imported from around the world to embellish the oak-dotted savannah, and the lawns were flooded throughout the summer to maintain their verdue.

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The money to create the Barron garden was gathered from a much larger landscape wrecked twenty miles away and from future generations who would foot the bill for its beauty. William Barron was principal of a syndicate that controlled the production of mercury in California, an element essential for refining gold and silver ores. Today, the blasted cinnabar tailings of New Almaden leach mercury into the reservoirs and streams of the Santa Clara Valley and the sediments of San Francisco Bay. Cleanup of New Almaden, if possible, is estimated to cost millions, but much of the downstream contamination is simply irremediable.

The Barron estate is typical of hundreds of other lovely gardens built from strip mining, clear-cutting, slave trading, chemicals, and munitions. Seldom are the ugly means and lovely end closely juxtaposed so that the observer can gauge the true costs involved. Lacking the direct involvement of their owners, such gardens are as much expressions of conspicuous display as the other purchased accoutrements of the estate.

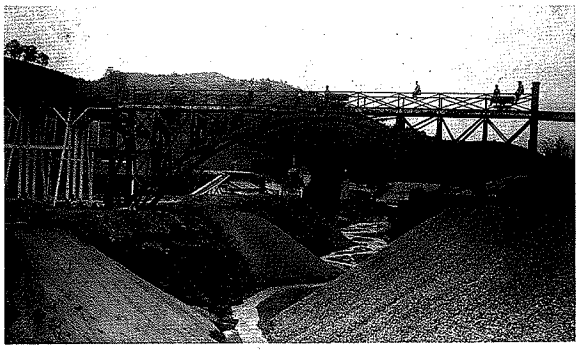
Frederick Law Olmsted perceived the connection that so few others saw while Mr. Barron was creating his garden. Sent out to California to manage the Mariposa Mining Estate during the Civil War, Olmsted noted that frontier culture was a thinly veneered state of barbarism based on mining and dominated by "the transient speculative class." Violence to land and people was endemic. True civilization was fitful, when it appeared at all.

To encourage it, Olmsted proposed a park chain in San Francisco and a garden city at Berkeley. But he was sensitive to the exploited source of wealth as well, and suggested that a fraction of the gold extracted from Mariposa be used to reclaim the tailings as a garden. Mining might then be the basis for a sustainable economy and leave the Mother Lode with lasting communities instead of ghost towns.

Unfortunately, the gold of Mariposa ran out, the country was abandoned, and Olmsted returned to his work on Central Park. Olmsted's proposal was over a century too early; the Barron garden and its hidden cost have long been the rule, and the exceptions are few.

In the garden is the redemption of our world. Western religions use it as a metaphor for paradise, for refuge, for grace. To William Blake, it was the green and pleasant Land over which the dark Satanic Mills were spreading their pall. In Olmsted's public gardens, workers could re-create themselves from the gray world in which they spent their lives. For increasing numbers of people today engaged in restoration projects, it is the maimed globe itself whose lovely image our machines send us from space. In healing it, we embrace it.

In short, in the responsiveness that necessarily exists between the active gardener and the natural world for which he or she cares, the garden is love itself. Against the mine, against the munitions and speculation that leave behind their legacy of ruin, the garden is the eternal and potent metaphor for the paradise it is within humanity's power now to create. You can see that possibility on Telegraph Hill, the blossoming bequest of a woman named Grace, who continues to come up with her roses.



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**25-4**
The mine dumps at New Almaden where an estimated 800,000 cubic yards of cinnabar tailings were dumped into Los Alamitos Creek and the mercury of the debris permanently contaminated the major streams of the Santa Clara Valley and the San Francisco South Bay [Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley]

**25-5**
The Barron Estate after Milton Latham had bought it for his wife Molly [San Mateo County Museum]

**25-6**
The Filbert Steps running through the garden [Michael Boland]