

Shakopee, Minnesota

The Garden of Time





It looks more like a Junior College than a prison. This view is looking toward the chapel. Modernist brick architecture plunked down in a featureless landscape. The work-release building is off to the right about 200 yards.



Near the chapel, a corridor is known as 'Main Street'. It contains the library, chapel gym and medical examining rooms. Before this building was constructed, the prison was in an outmoded facility nearby. The warden told me she had complaints that the prison was now too nice. She responded by saying you start out with a new building and eventually it gets old and beat up, just like the last prison did.

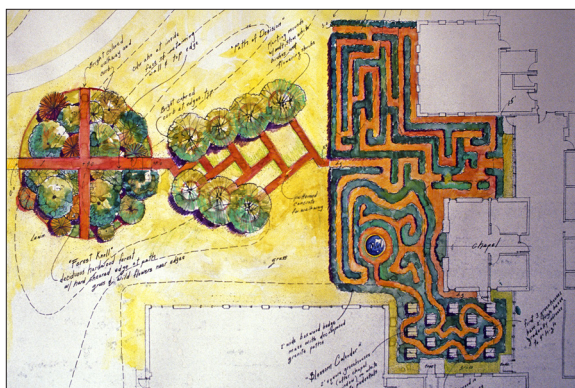
The Minnesota State Prison for Women is not a place where I ever thought I would be working. It took years for the Minnesota State Arts Board to finally decide that a white male was capable of designing a new landscape as part of their percent-for-art program.

I spent quite a bit of time **inside** and it was the kind of experience many men should have because even though I had a name tag, they called me “Pants” because inside, I was told, “*You only fresh meat.*”

Shakopee Correctional Facility is the only women’s prison in the state. The inmates don’t wear uniforms and you can’t tell the credit car forgers from the axe murderers, but they are all there. Most of the women are mothers and the cells (they look like college dormitory rooms) even have trundle beds under the normal beds when the children visit. However, the warden told me she had to stop the visitation program because it was too difficult to tell the difference between dandruff on an eight year old and heroin.

Over lunch with the warden, I asked if she had any problems she was not able to solve. She said, “The problem I can’t solve at the moment is that there are only two lesbian bars in Minneapolis.”

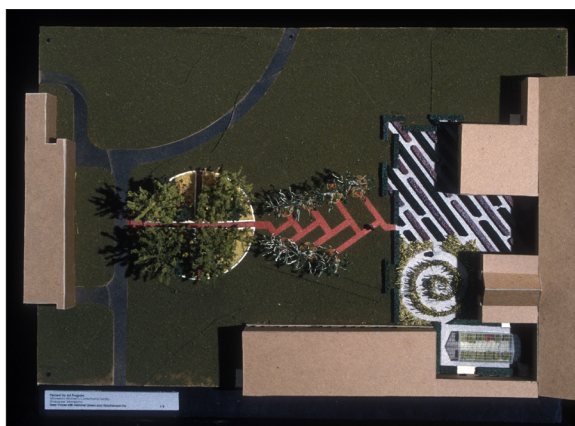
I looked at her incredulously, obviously not understanding. She continued, “Take a look around this room, have you ever thought about who would want to be a guard at a women’s prison?” “It works like this, The average rate of stay here is about eighteen months. The inmate gets friendly with a guard, the inmate is released, goes to one of the two bars, strikes up a relationship with the guard, gets a little leverage somehow and then the drugs start coming into the prison. You get it now?”



Early on in design development. Watercolor.



Presentation model showing a single large greenhouse.



When you look out most of the windows on ‘Main Street,’ you look across a barren, flat, grass expanse to one of the outlying buildings called the Work-Release Center. This is a kind of half-way house for partially released prisoners. They work in nearby communities during the work day and return to this building for nights and weekends. The prison has a very high recidivism rate and they want to do everything they can to ease the transition back into civilian life.

It seemed very important to make a more meaningful connection between the Main building and Work -Release. This time and this place was a critical juncture in a woman’s life and it needed to be noticed.

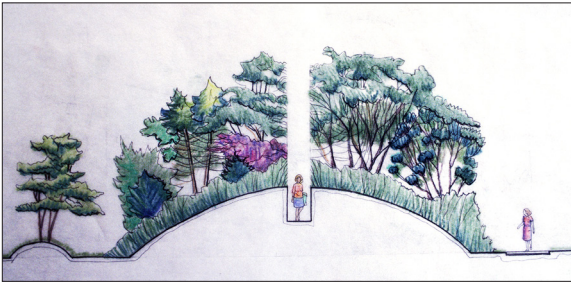
The melding of a sequence of events with a path kept recurring as the project moved into design development. I wanted spaces intended for procession and ritual. The references are regional and local. When a woman walks out of the door of the Main Building, She enters a maze. And because this is at the edge of the prairie in Minnesota, it is an **Agricultural Maze**. Rows of plants in straight lines. Adjacent, and in front of the chapel is a **Prairie Swirl**, planted in little blue stem grass that will grow to about three feet, as it does on the original prairie.

After having negotiated the Maze and the Swirl, she proceeds onward to the **Pathway of Decisions**. It consists of seven connected paths which all dead-end in circular clumps of Birch trees. The Lakota Sioux believe there are seven great decisions in a life that eventually lead us to where we are meant to go.

Finally, she arrives at the **Forest Knoll**. A hemispherical mound, cut into four quadrants and planted with trees and grasses native to the zone in Minnesota that marks the transition from prairie to forest. The four paths are literally straight and narrow. At the top of the mound the last set of decisions are made by choosing one of the four directions. Escape to the right, escape to the left, straight ahead to Work-Release, or turn around and go back to prison.



It can get to more than forty below in Shakopee so it was obvious that we had to have an understanding of this garden in winter



The original walkway cutting through the **Forest Knoll** was intended to be about two feet because I wanted it to feel difficult, but we had to change it to conform with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Even though there has never been a wheel-chair using prisoner in the history of the prison system, we widened the slots to three feet.



Seasonal studies were done with particular attention paid to fall leaf and blossom colors.



Between the chapel and the gym, adjacent to the prairie swirl is the **Blossom Calendar**. The prison has a horticulture program and trains women to work in the nursery business. In this early watercolor, thirteen green houses are shown. Later versions show the same number of green houses, but twelve of them have green plants and only one has plants with flowers. The single green house with flowers rotates with the other houses on the cycle of the full moon. This is because of the cycles of women's bodies. As you walk down Main Street it is possible to know what month it is by noticing which green house has the flowers. **It is a way to make time visible for those who are doing it.**



Far too little consideration is given to what exterior space looks like at night. And by extension what it will take to be lit properly.

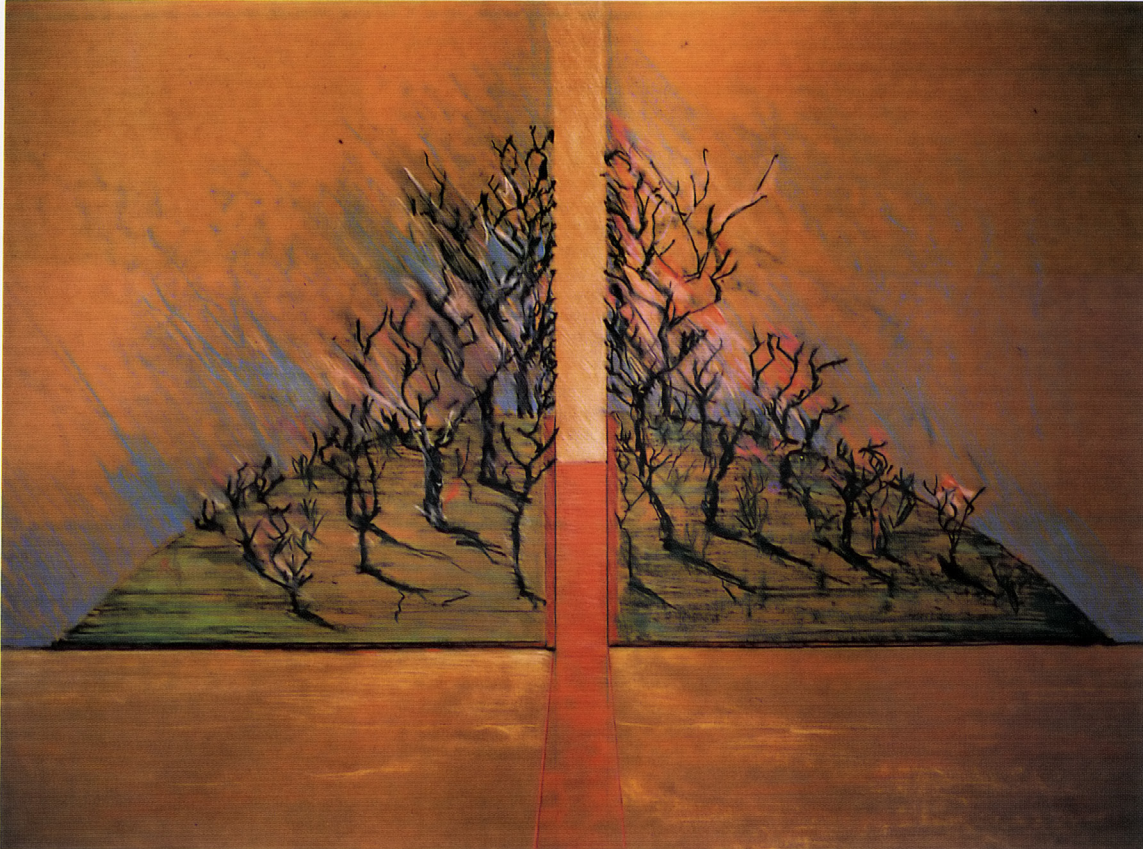


At one point we thought it would be important to have the maze move among the greenhouses, but later abandoned the idea. The shape of the greenhouses is a direct mimic of the architecture of the main building, particularly the adjacent chapel.



THE GARDEN OF TIME

By Kate Christianson



COURTESY OF GARY DWYER

In the confines of a Minnesota women's prison, an allegorical garden marks the passage of time and expresses the possibilities of renewal.

When the Minnesota Women's Correctional Facility in Shakopee, 40 miles southwest of Minneapolis, decided to enhance its suburbanlike campus with public art, it drew on state monies, served on an interdisciplinary arts committee, reviewed the work of hundreds of artists nationwide, and commissioned a landscape designer. The logic ended there. The Garden of Time is a one-third-acre miniaturized garden, completed in 1991; intricate as tapestry, it is fully understood by few who live there.

Six firms collaborated to make this project happen, each with a specific task. Landscape artist Gary Dwyer of San Luis Obispo, California—formal recipient of the Minnesota State Arts Board grant—stroved to reestablish the landscape with symbolic, allegorical meaning. For him, The Garden of Time was an elaborate pathway through swirls, mazes, and a forested knoll—the adventure of a mind that makes a choice.

Landscape architects Tom Oslund and Kathy Ryan of Hammel, Green and Abra-

hamson, Inc. of Minneapolis, agreed to serve as associate designers to produce the working drawings and, by default, to oversee construction, because they saw the garden as an experiment. They believed it would be a test for whether a landscape of this detail could be built in Minnesota—given not only the harsh, four-season climate, but also the relative lack of training among the local contractors.

As project manager, the Minnesota State Arts Board was particularly interested in the functional aspects of this project—the fact that prison inmates would be maintaining the garden. There are currently several new prison projects on the boards.

Prison superintendent Jackie Fleming was, in her own words, eager just to see the program done. With 138 inmates, convicted of everything from credit-card fraud to first-degree murder, she had other pressing issues on her mind. Besides, the newer inmates lacked a sense of shame, felt no need to serve the state that “got them caught”; she wondered if a garden could ever teach them.

But we, as dispassionate observers, can appreciate the purpose of the garden because we find it so human and empathize with life within a cloister, perhaps wanting to relieve the cloistering, to lose time by believing that our motive has a value. Yet, in terms of artistic intent, *The Garden of Time* falls short.

The garden is a visual improvement, replacing mown grass with finely textured views along the prison’s most highly trafficked and well-windowed hallway. In craftsmanship, the garden sets a standard far beyond most mid-western landscapes. But the seriousness and the symbolism of the garden go against its deepest mission: to invite and celebrate a bold, positive approach to the outside world.

Five subgardens, with their own written iconographies, comprise *The Garden of Time*: the Blossom Calendar, a jewel-box of a greenhouse, elevated in a grove of gable-topped evergreens, with flowers

to be rotated monthly, according to the lunar calendar; *Prairie Swirl*, a crushed stone pathway spiraling through native blue-stem grasses; *Agricultural Maze*, alternating rows of crushed stone, burning bush, and evergreen; *Pathway of Decisions*, a straight brick path, branching four times: left, three times and then right, to mulched rounds planted with white birch; and *Forest Mound*, which will eventually become a canopy of dark and somber woods, cut through the middle by the pathway. (Plants are three years from maturity.) Thus, by following the right path, a person could travel from the prison hallway to the independent living facilities across the way.

The basic meaning is painfully obvious, particularly to one in prison. Who needs to be reminded of time, when she is serving it? Who needs to have decision-making glorified, when the consequences of decisions are experienced every day?

Yet, there are far richer symbolisms here for those who care to study them. (A brief description hangs in the center of the hallway, but more can come from one’s own imagination.) The *Swirl*, for example, recalls the circular labyrinth on the floor of pilgrimage cathedrals, such as Chartres—particularly given its placement outside the prison chapel—while its essential combing pattern reminds us of native agrarian fields. Meanwhile, the seven birches refer to a secret society within the local Lakota Sioux, who wrote legends on birch bark and drew diagrams of *The Seven Critical Choices* faced by each person.

Forest Mound represents the primeval darkness that mankind keeps writ-

ing about, from fairy tales to opera: the place where people come to terms with evil; its very threat, one could argue, is the reason we invented the lawn. The choice of plants also has meaning. By its name alone, “Dwarf winged euonymous” is evocative, but by the nickname burning bush, it calls forth notions of unexpected prophesy.

Such a melting pot of symbols prevents the garden from transporting the viewer to another, specific world, where the imagination could run more freely. In addition, most of the imagery seems tied to the geometric shapes themselves, and not the individual plants. If Dwyer had focused on one symbolic source, like the native agrarian landscape, and explored the imagery in both the textural arrangement and the individual forms, colors, and growing characters of the plants, the viewer might become more engaged. As it is now, imagery is second to the artistic composition of the overall design.

“Some people will get some of it, and some will get some more,” Dwyer says about the garden’s message; and in many ways, he deserves to feel content. Art should never be fully understood; life to those in prison is thick with mystery.

Yet the designers have left no room for spontaneity or humor—the very conditions that provide a human release. With plants identified only in groups, as threads in a woven fabric, the design allows no self-expression. Plants are placed according to the visual cartoon, rather than how their specific character fits a particular space. Viewers thus respond to the design, without furthering their understanding of the plants. (Contrast this, for example, with the more intrinsic approach to park design by renowned horticulturalist and landscape designer, Roberto Burle-Marx.)

Moreover, the entire landscape is so compartmentalized, that no one section has the strength to hold its own. As a result, eyes spin, unable to contemplate more than the overview of texture.

For all its symbolic aspirations, *The Garden of Time* has never been used to

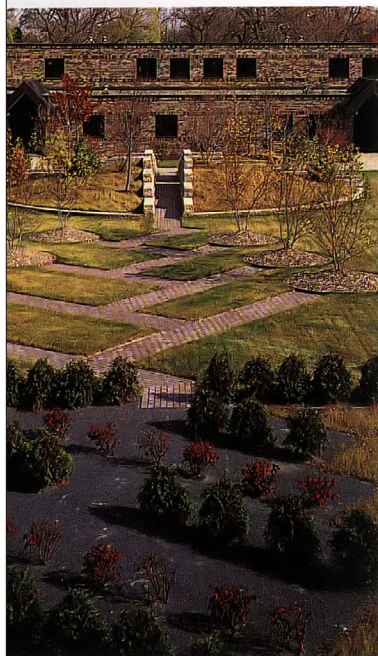
Dwyer’s drawings, showing the Forest Mound (opposite and below left), evoke the mystical and symbolic feeling of the garden. The Prairie Swirl and Agricultural Maze (below right) demonstrate the craftsmanship of the project.

COURTESY OF GARY DWYER

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE HEINRICH



The Pathway of Decisions (photo below and drawing below right) links the mound with the garden (plan bottom) and is based on legends of the Lakota Sioux.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE HEINRICH

commemorate the inmate's passage to autonomy. Perhaps the obstacles are merely practical: it has no seating, special permits are required, and the prison chooses not to celebrate departure. But the fact remains, the garden is not a comfortable place to be. Settings seem disjointed, and change too soon to offer a sense of enclosure. (Fuller plants will, for the most part, only serve to make the pathway more distinct.) Staff members talk of wanting benches, but—given the large, landscaped courtyard on the back side of the facility—it is questionable if either staff or inmates would come here instead.

The Garden of Time—winner of a 1992 Merit Award from the Minnesota Chapter, American Society of Landscape Architects; site of 28 tour groups a week (primarily students, legislators, and politicians); and the recipient of several stories on design concept alone—is essentially a quiet backdrop, a site to be seen from the corridors above. Dwyer suggests it should be reviewed in reference to other symbolic landscapes,

like the Vietnam Memorial (Washington, D.C.) or Paley Park in New York City; yet these places isolate an important fragment of life and take it to the general public, while The Garden of Time essentially attempts the opposite—carrying a worldly maxim to a small isolated segment of society. Given a garden's innate ability to heal—emotionally, spiritually, even physically, through the use of medicinal plants—it seems better to evaluate The Garden of Time against the more humble, but perhaps more appropriate test of how it improves the inmates' well-being.

Will the inmates choose to make the garden more sensuous, e.g., by adding herbs for their cooking or a flowering groundcover to replace the rounds of mulching? (Such spaces are allowed in the design.) Can they find a way to interact with it, beyond the viewing

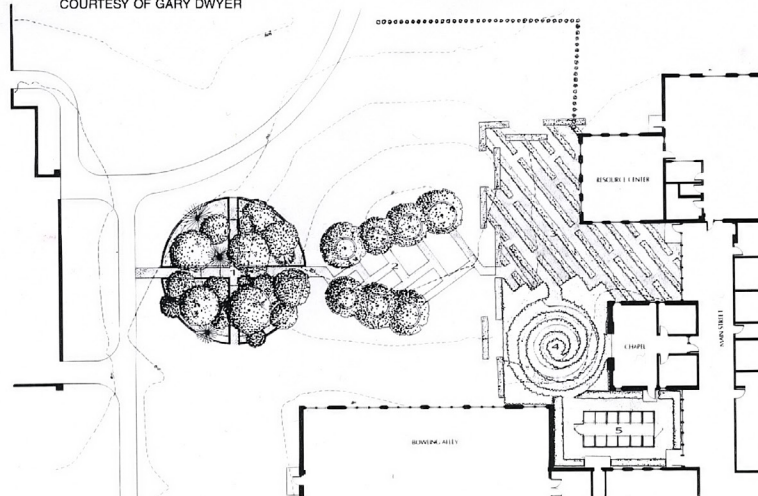
through the windows? If it remains exclusive, we must begin to ask: Would it be more successful as an artwork if it were glass-enclosed in a public park and placed as a Prison Memorial—us as them, forced to be looking in?

As it is, The Garden of Time seems to appeal more to designers, than to those who live with it. But the human energy, so visible within it, saves it from being only a misplaced intellectual artwork. Handcut bricks, hedges cut just so, rows of metal tree frames set exact indicate that many skilled craftsmen wanted this place to work. (The entire design team lost money on this project for just that reason.) Indeed, in a place where women need to find their dignity, the care behind the project could be its greatest feature.

Kate Christianson is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer, specializing in design.



COURTESY OF GARY DWYER





Budget constraints finally forced us to modify the greenhouse idea. It turns out that to build a fully functioning, heated and ventilated greenhouse in a harsh climate is very expensive. One greenhouse and twelve steel frames whose interior is planted with arborvitae, which is trimmed to conform to the shape of the frames.

The preceding article was written soon after construction and I am happy to report that the walk through **The Garden of Time** has become a ritual at the prison and crowds of women stand around on Main Street and watch one of theirs walk the walk.

