Mappus Mundi: The Portuguese Immigrant Garden in California
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Photographs by Travis Annex

1 Topiary arch suggesting a grotto on Pacific Street, San Leandro.
The Portuguese immigrant
has one of the most obtrusive
gardening traditions in
California, and conversations
with Portuguese gardeners
reveal that their gardens
represent different expecta-
tions than those assumed by
the design profession. The
gardens published in the
professional press such as
Ortho books, or House and
Garden or Sunset magazines,
present the front garden as
an empty theater, a border
framing the house as parsley
frames meat on a platter. The
compositional arrangements
used are still those of late
modernism, that is,
Mondrian's variable grid.
The planting is usually a
gaze of "native" grey-
greenery, punctuated by an
occasional reverent pause for
a Japanese-style garden
device. The Post-Modem,
or down-scaled Baroque
garden, which recalls that
other relic of early Beaugan-
vara posturing, the down-
scaled one of the most de
terminant of them
much seen. The professional
back yard is defined and
made significant by its
 provision for well-established
middel-class social scenarios:
outdoor cooking and eating,
swimming and sun-bathing,
playing games with the
children.
The Portuguese are not part
of the same web of social
behavior, and their gardens
symbolize their differing
values through tactics that
are a mixture of traditional
Portuguese spatial prefer-
ences and experimentation
with the new materials
and unfamiliar gardening
traditions now available to
them.
Their communities are
dispersed throughout the
state, but they are small,
self-contained, and sufficiently
well-established for their
members to own businesses
that can employ new im-
migrants, many of whom do
not even need to learn to
speak English. While they
are not isolated from the
dominate culture, their
gardens serve not so much to
emphasize well-established
social values but as or-
ganizational tools to help in
evaluation of the old, and
assimilation of the new
cultures that form the
immigrant's life, on the
way to a new working
synergy.
In this process immigrant
gardeners update historic
tactics. They often in-
corporate versions of the
ancient memory theater to
stabilize reminders of both
past and present in a spatial
continuum. They use the
cabinet of wonders, a form of
artifact organization familiar
from the sixteenth century
onward, to direct the
speculation of its maker
towards the unknown
instead of the known. Most
often they operate from an
understanding of the
nature of work and of time-use
based on intensity and
perseverance that is still a
vital part of their culture.
Most of these gardens serve
as a form of learning for the
individual. The few private
immigrant gardens that serve
as lessons for the community
are usually based on
traditional religious
memorials: Madonnas in
grottos made from up-ended
bathtubs or miniature
chapels copying those from
the homeland. One such
garden in San Leandro has
two small chapels in a
"aisken garden" to provide a
resting place in an annual
religious procession. Some
religious artifacts are
permanent: grottos or
topiary arches with statues of
the Virgin Mary. More often
they are temporary displays,
like the Portuguese-style
cruche incorporating many
parts of the nativity story
which a few families build
in their front yards at
Christmas.
But the immigrant garden
is primarily a space in which to
try to establish a range of tactics
for personal spatial and cultural
expression that include
traditional labor practices,
utilization of ideas through
collaboration and catalog-
ing material objects;
dematerialization and the
encouragement of wonder
achieved by tricks with scale
and juxtaposition; spatial
stability achieved through
symmetry and ornament;
and a sense of connection
with past time by using
souvenirs.
The garden is a place to
work. The Portuguese in
California are primarily
blue-collar workers, and
productive manual labor was
and still is central to their
economy. Some became
agricultural workers; many
now own farms in the
Sacramento valley. Those
who now live in the cities
often have elaborate
vegetable gardens: fava beans
on trellises are a sure sign of
the Portuguese immigrant, as
are taro plants in the front
yard. Many came as sailors,
and either settled in
Northern Coastal lumber
towns that relied on the sea
for shipping, or as fishermen,
stopping in Hawaii before
coming to the Bay Area,
where many now work and
live in San Leandro, where
their gardens contain many
references to the sea.
Portuguese gardeners, both
male and female, work the
land themselves, and their
garden designs develop
gradually through the
cumulative effects of a
random sequence of small
decisions made during the
course of the week, such as
digging, weeding, or
pruning. The unplanned
chaos of building materials,
not preconceived plans, generate layout and
form. The importance of labor is further reflected in the
time spent, and, high maintenance of
the special effects and scenarios
built into the garden.
Work and Reverie

Garden labor consists of an ongoing series of small decisions directed toward an imagined but an undesigned goal. Work of this kind is not boring, for each action still shapes form, but as plants do grow back, the threat of irrevocable mistakes that underlies other kinds of work without templates (the workmanship of risk) is not present. Without the overriding fear of going astray, and with the gardener’s knowledge that nature does not allow total human control anyway, the mind can lapse into reverie, a state of attentive dreaming that is the matrix of creativity. Reverie is a working dream in which both the idea and the skills and techniques used for achieving it are considered at the same time, making it a critical support for a life based on productive labor.

The Portuguese garden is both the place for, and the manifestation of, the process of reverie. The gardeners provide themselves with the opportunity for reverie by creating a continual variety of small labors in their gardens, especially topiary work, patterning the ground with various nonorganic materials, and painting. These tactics control natural and nonorganic materials by making dissimilar surfaces into similar ones, substituting like texture or color for variation, but most importantly, such tactics require time, and many small decisions, encouraging reverie.

Topiary

The varieties of topiary in San Leandro range from narrative (a topiary dragon on Sibyl Street) and religious memorials (an arch and cross on Kelly Street) to more formal abstractions. Typically topiary emphasizes the borders of the house, the pathways or the lots by repeating those borders. If the hat-shaped topiary shaped by Mr. Silver in San Leandro is not typical, the layout of the topiary in the garden is. Bushes trimmed into hundreds of trimmed hedges follow the front path, border the house, and creep around the perimeter.

Repetition has been reduced to its most abstract in another front garden, by laying a continual grid of trimmed jumpers over the entire area like a piece of polka-dotted cloth. There are a few other gardens laid out on the continuous grid, but this is a new organizational strategy in San Leandro. The bilaterally symmetrical garden, with identical beds on either side of a central path, is much more common. Perhaps the sources for this garden are European, although even those Portuguese born in the United States could have seen this typical Baroque garden composition in large public gardens and, within the lifetime of the more elderly, at the world’s fair held in Chicago, New York, or San Francisco in the first half of the century.
2 A new garden planting pattern in San Leandro, the infinte grid, marked with topary evergreens.
3 Mrs. Costello's cabinet of curiosities combining natural wonders and man-made artifacts.
Painting

Painting does not need the same frequency of maintenance as pottery, but it allows the gardener to control the color of nonorganic surfaces. Many San Leandro gardeners have unified natural and man-made materials through the common application of paint. This transformation employs the reasoning used in older forms of cognition like fairy tales, or magic. Magic is the acceptance of a proposal, either mental or physical, that transforms the unlike into the like. Applied magic, or fairy tales, is a mode of instruction in which effort and success are joined around some wondrous talisman. The garden offers a good opportunity to display this symmetrical order. Its talisman, of unlike material transformed into symmetrical order, or of spiritual power symbolized by the Virgin Mary in a garden, offer the hope of knowing how to succeed against all odds, which is an important part of the risky life of the immigrant.

The Cabinet of Curiosities: Accumulation Becomes Order

The Portuguese garden is often structured as a "wonder cabinet," another historical tradition that is based on transformation by magic, or what Geoffrey Hartman calls "pseudo-consolatory," of the incomprehensible into the understood. The wonder cabinet, developed by Renaissance princes and prelates, was the place in that their accumulated wonders, natural and man-made, were arranged in a spatial order that might suggest similarities and analogies useful for further speculation.

The process of generating or grasping meaning through wonder marked the beginning of the institutionalization of knowledge now called the Renaissance. Although by the first decade of the seventeenth century Galileo was already deriding the wonder cabinet as an inadequate tool for thought precisely because it incorporated everything, especially that which was then considered marginal or weird, the tradition did in some cases lead from curiosity to the development of the new mode of reasoning called the scientific revolution between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Most of these wonder cabinets have subsequently been separated into art and science collections or dispersed. The collection of the architect John Soane is one of the few to survive as more than a printed catalogue. But the principle underlying the wonder cabinet as a mode of learning, random juxtaposition of physical categories connected by formal similitude, still survives in the works of both the intellectually sophisticated and the naive. The visionary city planner Patrick Geddes was still proposing a wonders cabinet, which he called the Outlook Tower and Index Museum, for various world's fairs at the end of the nineteenth century. The dada artist Marcel Duchamp, the proto-surrealist Giorgio De Chirico, and the surrealists themselves all continued the juxtaposition of unlike categories as a tactic for new, or newly named, understanding. They merely switched the provenance of the wonders from nature and the products of skilled artisans to the production lines of the industrial revolution, and the name of the understanding to be gained from cosmology to psychology.

Portuguese gardeners today still assemble natural wonders and commercial products into private collections, organizing them into personal dictionaries of meaning. Their collections are held in shape by geometric patterns and structures that assume the potential for organization to produce meaning. The Portuguese are not the only gardeners who shape their gardens into a sequence of rooms without walls, the practice seems to be common in all the vernacular gardening in the Mediterraneum tradition in California, and Italian, Spanish, and Mexican immigrants also create gardens that are architecturally divided into stages or passages between the inside and the outside world. But the popular image of the gardens in the United States is still based on the traditional English garden, that is, on an image of the untrammeled out-of-doors; or on its Japanese cousin that also emphasizes spaces rather than the walls around or the objects within the garden. The vernacular Mediterraneum garden tradition may stem from the fact that from the time of the Romans to the present day the domestic garden was frequently inside in an atrium or courtyard and more easily conceived of in architectural terms.

In a back garden in San Leandro, Mrs. Costelli has constructed her own wonder cabinet, moving from the collection of curiosities to the telling of stories. She divided the garden into ever smaller stages with different gravels, pavers, and edging materials. In each she arranged real and artificial rocks, shells, plants, large and small figurines, miniature Japanese bridges, and many different kinds of mirror, to make up tiny scenes of animals and people gathered around watering holes.

Now animals or humans drinking or bathing in water
4 Horseshoes and farm implements from the Rubello family farm, combined into handmade memorials. The name plate over the porch says that Mr. Rubello is the last surviving son.

5 The island of Pico set into a concrete sea with bas-relief whales.
at the spring of life is an element of many European fairy tales of birth, death, and regeneration, and spiritual transformation, like baptism, is also accompanied by water. The tradition of the seaside Portuguese explorers is also recalled by images of water. The quality of the sea changes in the life of the Portuguese seafarer is nicely suggested by one of the more startling miniature scenes in Mrs. Costell’s garden: trumpeting elephants charging over a red Japanese bridge. The symbolic image of the water hole may be part of Mrs. Costell’s own understanding of an old mythic tradition, or it may be her recreation of scenes from the Walt Disney versions of fairy stories. But Mrs. Costell made the garden to delight and refresh herself and to open a window onto curiosity and change for all.

Souvenirs
Mrs. Costell’s garden is filled with purchased souvenirs of the inexpensive type usually bought by children who have no memories of their own. Adults, on the other hand, can usually make their own souvenirs from the artifacts of their past. The garden of the Rubello family in San Lorenzo is a good example. The gate, fences, and ornamental frame around the miniature windmill were made by Mr. Rubello from welded horseshoes saved from the family farm. The other agricultural artifacts—plows, pumps, wagon wheels—are also remnants of the valued family past. This past, and the style of labor on which it was based, has become more precious as the style of labor has changed and as the family has died away.

Males are more likely to have souvenirs of their own property than are females. According to a United Nations report of 1980, females, who do more than 60 percent of the world’s total work, own less than 1 percent of the world’s goods. Mrs. Costell’s options were typically less tied to family possessions, and, using new and second-hand souvenirs she explored more abstract ideas, like defamiliarization through radical changes in scale.

Miniaturization
There is nothing miniature in nature. Scale requires human beings for its definition. Our present response to the miniature is based on its past history; miniatures were once the precious province of the wealthy, who commissioned miniature models of their possessions. Now, despite the possibility for anyone to explore the cognitive revolution of the miniature, climbing to the top of a skyscraper or making a miniature railroad, an aura of privilege still clings to reduced scale.

The scale of a garden is determined by many factors: the size of the house and its lot, the kinds of plants available, and the neighboring preferences in planting patterns. Most Portuguese immigrant houses and lots are comparatively small, and very few gardens have chosen to grow large or busy plants. Instead they prefer a horizontal garden, perhaps reflecting low or absent planting in Portugal, and make their patterns with gravel, very small plants, and figurines designed for interior tables and shelves, that become miniatures when used outdoors. Mrs. Costell’s placement of these miniature interior figurines on the ground rather than as a masterpiece transforms the visitor into a giant who is too big to move among them and is forced to view them from far away.

Today miniaturization is a critical part of the com-
6 Sunnyside Street garden using available red and white stones from California, hammering into sand and set with mortar, in the traditional Portuguese manner.

7 Detail, showing the surface achieved by this paving technique.
Gravel garden with Japanese-style corner.
patternization of memory and the production and occupation of maps. Whereas there is much of the miniature that is simply too small to see with the naked eye, one of the principal points of its use is that its outside edge is completely visible and therefore assumed to be controllable. Then which is too big to be seen at all at one time is miniaturized into visibility, and map readers then project themselves first figuratively and then literally into real space by imagining and then walking or driving through it.

Miniature souvenirs and maps offer control of things or concepts too big or too ambiguous to buy, like Niagara Falls or a water-ing hole.

For the Portuguese gardener, miniaturization also offers a map of the past and a direct way to unite past and present geography. The memory of the homeland occupies an important position in the San Leandro community, and many local families return frequently to Portugal, especially to the Azores. While memory of other cultural traditions is kept alive by institutions such as the Catholic church or the Portuguese clubs, memory of the shape of the land is generally kept by individuals in the shape of their private gardens. On Frederick Street in San Leandro, a man who was a deep-sea fisherman from the Azores made a central fountain in his rose garden in the shape of his former quarry, the terrapin. His next-door neighbor, from Pico, built a miniature of his native island, outlined with up-ended sections of pine trunks in a Japanese style, surrounded by a concrete aggregate ocean in which swim two bas-relief whales with tinted teeth of white rock.

The scale is inconsistent, the whales are bigger than the island, but the miniature can reconnect the viewer to real spatial scale as surely as can a road map. In fact, many of the motifs used in Portuguese gravel gardens recall the decorative borders and motifs used around maps that are so much a part of their scaterring past. The four-part star, possibly left over from the Etruscan and Roman city-founding device of the crossed cards and decumanus, and used on maps to indicate the cardinal directions, is the single most common motif in Portuguese gravel gardens.

Patterned Ground

Despite the frequent use of miniatures and mapping conventions that encourage a sense of intellectual connection to the Portuguese homeland, many Portuguese gardeners simply reproduce what they can of their past as close to its real site as possible. Many Portuguese streets, plazas, and private courtyards are paved in mosaic patterns made of squares of grey and white lava. A small-scale version of this patterned plaza with a central fountain is a favorite garden subject for the immigrant gardener in California. One gardener on Sunny Side Street in San Leandro even made a patterned mosaic ground in the Azorean tradition, substituting local California materials for the lava blocks used in Portugal. The pattern composed of a six-pointed star and straight and undulating bands was made by pounding red and white stones into a sandy bed with a four-foot vertical mallet. When the stones were even, mortar was brushed into the cracks and water was sprinkled over everything to form a firm cement. The lava blocks used in Portugal are about 2.5 inches to a side and fit more regularly together than do the small, irregular rocks available in California, but even this Sunny Side Street version of the traditional plaza is much more precise than the more common gardens using loose gravel to reproduce the undulating white and black lines of homeland paving.

Conclusion

This garden also includes an element from the Japanese garden, the border of up-ended pine logs. Many Japanese families live in San Leandro, and their gardens have influenced an increasing number of Portuguese to combine geographical references to both Portugal and Japan. It may be that the immigrant gardener, who once operated within the traditional pattern of cultural diffusion, that is to say, only copied ideas that could be personally seen, which encouraged formal similarity within a small geographic area for a long time, is now considering the diffusion practices of popular culture, the widespread geographical diffusion of ideas by mass-media, with an attendant short life span. Of course, in San Leandro the example of the Japanese garden is right next door, but a shift from making a garden that reconnected one to the homeland halfway around the world to a garden that introduces one to an unknown land that is still, despite propaganda for the concept of the Pacific Rim, considered to be all the way around the world, indicates a major realignment of the cultural and cognitive values of the Portuguese gardener in California.