



Event and Identity

Tracing the sense of place through typical landscapes

UNTOLD GARDENS by POLIS ARCHITECTURE FRONT

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A case of typical private gardens at The Sustainable City, Dubai

In 2008, driving along Dubai's Emirates Road (back then known as 'Bypass' Road) was an austere experience. Though the driving time there was shorter, missing most of today's traffic, the lack of any mundane landmark in the open desert reduced the sense of orientation for the inexperienced 'by-passer'. Today, the relative regularity of amenities along this stretch is comforting – desertification has been in reverse in Dubai. Compounds lining up familiar private houses in oasis-like settings, are largely populated, appearing dense and lush from the distance. Alongside the houses, a myriad of measured private gardens complement and saturate the image of abundance – this image was hard to conjure up 17 years ago.

It's become necessary to reevaluate garden spaces from the point of view of typology; the need to recognize the garden as an outdoor living space and reflect on its emergent typical elements, spatial details, and their organic link to the people who use them. To be more illustrative, the example of traditional dwellings can be drawn. Many traditional housing types owe their renowned status to the unique outdoor space they are intertwined with: the walled garden, the courtyard, the patio, porch, the eivan, the portico – to name the most prominent. Effectively, what these typical elements embody is both a living space and a place, a piece of built nature. It is simultaneously a symbol and a function, an interim space between the world and our home – and a practical extension of our activities. If we take a step into our present-day villas beyond the lavish compound gates and meandering collector roads, in most instances the approach to these gardens is rather ad-hoc, or at worst, ignorant.

The detection of typical spaces is part of the recognition of the sense of a place – in other words, a place's identity. With respect to a place, identity is seen as a pattern, an inherent and legitimate, subtle recurrence that frames the similar and the different moments in people's lifestyles. It is neither a rule nor a uniformity, in fact far from those – it is the stamp of an organic cycle of activities that grow to be a rhythm, much like how rhythms emerge in people's acts in communities. It is not a negation of variety, but actually a discovery of the form of variety. Identity is not and cannot be imposed upon a place, it can only be traced or read out of it, for it is usually a



Garden A



Garden B



Garden C



Garden C

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Scenes from garden A

writing that is already there. Typology is a key for this reading, for as in the case of any writing, this too consists of a chain of 'characters' – in another word, the types.

Our search for the contours of identity and the relevance of types to it became clearer in three of our small garden projects. It was in Dubai's Sustainable City that the studio had the chance to design gardens on a number of identical private yards. This is a cleverly planned community with some simple but wise environmental principles implemented, most importantly the rationally sized yards that are integrated in the buildings' forms. We saw in this an opportunity to test and express this interpretation of typology.

In the first case, in garden A, tranquility and the sense of being somewhat screened off was a dominant behavior that matched the client's intuition. This was also formulated by the key request of placing a main plant, a tree at the center as a staring moment. This set in motion an array of plants in dispersed patches organizing a slightly labyrinthine space with drifty passages. The resulting perception of layers of greenery evoke a denser and deeper garden than its actual size is. The built masonry sitting area took a border position, the furthest from any functional movement through the garden.

The second garden, B, used roughly the same amount and types of elements as garden A. It was primarily intended for gatherings. The requirement for such a space is relatively straightforward, and the organization that it entails is less ambiguous. To define multiple gathering zones, the inserted plant elements create clearer delineations, and although the amount of vegetation is about the same as in garden A, the space is less layered, the sitting objects are dominant, they





Scenes from garden B

act as figures, they are not built in. The passage element is not drifting here as in the previous example, it works more as a narrow path in this space.

The third example, garden C is dominated by a sign in the center, and its essence revolves around this. In a certain sense, a space so conceived extends the common perception of time and place, bringing remembrance in as part of the experience. A central tree, requested specifically to be an olive, is now a distinct symbol, from which the rest of the elements radiate outwards. Though the hierarchy is stronger in this instance, both the elements and the arrangement are analogous with the previous examples.

Several of our other projects have since been part of this search. The more we looked at the space and the requirements while searching for typical elements, the more confirmed we were that, generally, there are about four different types of these gardens: a place of recess; a place to gather; a symbolic place, and a place of play. Additionally, there are typical principles as well, related to the users movement (geometry) on one hand, and the climate on the other, acting as constituents, reduced to a few essential elements, such as: hardscape as dominant base; drought-tolerant potted garden as figure; the center condition elements; the border condition elements; and the flow or passage through the space. Creating places through the filter of typology, which provides a defined set of tools and ways of working with them, seem to respond well to all different conditions and uses, reflect the various needs and backgrounds of users.

To sum up, the meaning of typical elements with this backdrop and their organic link to identity may prove critical



Garden A

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Scenes from garden B

at a point in time. Typology is an investigation of patterns and common behaviors of form, objects and material on various scales. This is influenced by factors, some which are inherent (human) while others are external (nature). The inherent needs on one hand and the exterior conditions on the other give rise to similarities in how we organize the space – they create patterns which are personified by objects we desire or need. According to the Italian art historian G.C. Argan, spatial ‘types’ emerge through the “existence of a series of buildings (or

objects) having between them an obvious formal and functional analogy”. According to this, the built environment, as a fabric of types, records and sustains our traditions of interactions with each other and with nature. Types inevitably emerge in the historical process – in a sense we cannot even escape from creating types around us. Still, reflecting on typical objects does not mean a static adherence to existing forms. In “dealing with the demands of the actual historical situation” - Argan writes - “the typological and the inventive aspect of the creative process are continuous and interlaced”.

Orchestrating landscapes that come to express more organically the features of a community is a potential attempt to return to a genuine process of tracing a distinct identity – it is akin to a venture to conceive a tradition. ■



Project Details:

Private gardens at The Sustainable City

Location: Dubai, UAE

Design: Untold Gardens by POLIS
ARCHITECTURE FRONT

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Photo credit: Fanik Photography, Anja Grosheva

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