

nature in its essence

Shelley Egoz, landscape architect, considers whether the Baha', World Centre gardens, Haifa, Israel is symbolic of the religion's relationship with nature.



The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizen, is the teaching of the Bah'ullah (The Glory of God), the spiritual founder of the Baha'i faith in mid nineteenth century Iran . The gardens of the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, express that philosophy through an extremely meticulous and retentive aesthetic. The most striking characteristic of this project is an axial symmetry on a grand scale. Symmetry is used to create spatial formal perfection exemplifying an interpretation of a particular religious world-view and its relationship to nature.

Five million people worldwide follow Baha'i faith. This relatively new religion evolved from the Babi faith that was declared in 1844 by the Bab ("the Gate"). The Bab saw himself as the messenger whose duty is to prepare humanity for the appearance of another divine Teacher, following the known religions' leading figures. Less than twenty years later, in 1863, another figure, the Bah'ullah, announced himself as that divine teacher and founded the Baha'i faith. Baha'i claims to be an independent monotheistic religion. The main message of the Baha'i faith is global unity and justice and their ideals aspire for equality amongst all. Believers have suffered persecution in Iran and many are scattered throughout the world while their spiritual centre is located in Haifa and Acre, Israel, where the burial places of their founders lie. The centre is supported by donations from the worldwide Baha'i community.

During the late nineteenth century Mount Carmel of Haifa, a biblical site held sacred by Jews, Christians, Muslims and Baha'i alike, was chosen to become the burial site for the holy figure.

In 1909, during the time that the land of Palestine (now Israel) was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire the remains of the Bab were interred into a modest mausoleum on Mount Carmel, in the port city of Haifa in Northern Israel.

In 1953, a golden-domed shrine, designed by the Canadian architect William Sutherland Maxwell, was constructed on Mount Carmel. The golden dome holding the remains of the Bab became one of the icons of the city of Haifa. A series of simple terraced gardens was also constructed in the early 1950s. The relatively modest gardens were tended to with much care and the shrine and its surrounding were a significant tourist attraction.

Throughout the years further land around the

shrine was purchased by the Baha'i community and in 1987 a decision was made to expand the administrative structures and their grounds. Redevelopment of the site began in 1990 and was orchestrated by the Canadian architect Fariborz Sahba. Sahba designed a nineteen-terraced garden of an outstanding scale. The number of nineteen is repeated throughout the project and is significant to Baha'i as it symbolically stands for the Bab and his eighteen followers. The terraces were constructed around the golden-domed shrine that holds the remains of the Bab.

Gardens mirror humans' views of nature. The terraced gardens of the Baha'i World Centre are one contemporary example of the need of humans to modify a landscape and exert control over nature. Major earthworks to transform a landscape are not a new phenomenon: the megalomaniac gardens of Louis the 14, 'King of the Sun', in Versailles are the most conspicuous example.

At the Baha'i World Centre thousands of cubic meters were excavated and relocated to create terraces that radiate towards the golden-domed shrine and emphasize its symbolic significance to the faith followers. The terraces extend a kilometre along the mountain, reaching 225 meters in height and spanning between 60 and 400 meters across the mountain. The construction also engaged major engineering works involving changes to the streets of the city of Haifa to create two pedestrian bridges that allow for continuity and visitors flow through the garden.

The aspiration for perfection is reflected in the detailed scale as well. Landscape details such as the retaining walls, stairs and water fountains are meticulously carved out of the local stone, some of the elaborate ornate details were sent to be carved in Italy. A dramatic contrast in colour and texture exists between the orange crushed tiles used on the paths and the light-coloured stone paving.

At night, the site is extensively lit evoking theatrical drama. To Baha'i, the brightness of the site which is reinforced at night is symbolic: it contrasts with the dark conditions in which their Teacher, the Bab, was held in persecution in Iran.

The plantings comprise a mix of native and exotic plants. Palms and Cypress trees are planted in a symmetrical manner conveying an extreme sense of control. The gardens are kept immaculate by a team of 70 gardeners. In a dry country such as Israel, where water resources are scarce, maintaining such a perfect green



1: The Golden-domed shrine and its gardens are one of the icons of Haifa (photo by Giora Dan). 2: Night-time lighting creates drama and holds symbolic meaning to Baha'i. (Photo courtesy the Baha'i International Community). 3: Some of the elaborate stone carvings were done in Italy. (photo by Giora Dan). 4: Grand-scale earthworks were performed to achieve perfect axial symmetry. (Photo courtesy the Baha'i International Community). 5: A team of 70 gardeners are kept to maintain the meticulous gardens. (Photo courtesy the Baha'i International Community).

landscape is a challenge. A sophisticated automated irrigation system that uses recycled greywater as well as other practices aimed at reducing water consumption such as mulching, drought pruning in early summer and under-lawn drip irrigation for minimal evaporation have been introduced to the management of the gardens.

The mega scale of the axial and perfect symmetry, and sterile design language used in the new gardens is typical of autocratic messages. Considering the Baha'i faith ideals are about egalitarianism and aspire "to transform the hearts of the people of the world and create a united global community while celebrating our diversity", the large scale of the project and its powerful imposition on the landscape of the city of Haifa are intriguing. Nevertheless, gardens are the way we articulate our relationship to nature and nature is a mirror of and for Culture.

The Greek Platonic world-view, for example, saw truth to be beyond nature, thus symmetry and precise geometric forms rather than organic nature imitating forms expressed the ultimate perfection. To landscape designers in particular, nature is a primary foundation of power and social value as well as a source of inspiration. Designers, however, need to keep in mind that nature is an ambiguous concept, understood in different ways by various cultures. The retentive aesthetic, which to me evoked unease and an extreme sense of control over nature reads differently to the Baha'i who believe that: *Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator - Bah'ullah.* ■■

Acknowledgement: Thank you to the Baha'i International Community for permitting the use of its photography.