

OUTLINE PROGRAM ANALYSIS

(Jan. 1980 RF)

SETTING.

Geographically, Forestiere Underground Gardens is located in approximately the center of the State of California almost midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It is near the center of the San Joaquin Valley, three miles south of the San Joaquin River and just two blocks east of Freeway 99 on West Shaw Avenue in Fresno County.

The underground gardens complex is contained in the remaining ten acre parcel (less streets and roads, measuring 633 feet by 595 feet) of an original seventy acre parcel. The general surrounding region, mostly to the west, is primarily agricultural. It is one of the richest farming regions in the state and the nation, with vast acreages of grape vineyards, fig orchards and some almond and peach orchards. Grapes by far comprise the leading crop for Fresno County, which includes a variety of wine grapes, table grapes and sun-dried seedless raisins.

The immediate surrounding area, within a half mile radius, is composed of a mixture of conflicting uses and industrial, commercial and residential development patterns. The area is generally depressed economically; and is in need of development of a detailed plan to deal with the problems created by incompatible adjacent uses. The Fresno County Planning Commission suggested the development of just such a plan in its resolution of 10-24-78. The Fresno County Board of Supervisors identified Forestiere Underground Gardens as an historic resource listed on the National Register of Historic Places and described by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as a resource unique to the county, state and nation. Such recognition was provided by the inclusion of Section 710-02:9.00 in the Bullard Community Plan on 10-8-79.

Forestiere Underground Gardens is described as a unique historical and architectural entity. It has been recognized as such by its listing on the National Register of Historic Places on

October 28, 1977; by its designation as a California Registered Historical Landmark by the California Historical Resources Commission at its Fresno meeting on January 6, 1978; and by its ultimate formal identification as an historical resource in the proposed local community plan on October 8, 1979. The Gardens was formally dedicated and presented with a bronze plaque by the California Department of Parks and Recreation on October 12, 1979. "Part of the uniqueness of the gardens is that it transcends being just merely a piece of private property and because of its importance, it becomes a matter of public concern..." (National Trust for Historic Preservation 10-4-78).

The gardens complex of underground chambers, grottos, patios and garden-courts^{is} the creation of Baldasare Forestiere (1879-1946). They encircle his underground home where he lived and worked until the month before his death. The almost seven acres of grottos, patios, garden-courts and auto-drive are adorned with citrus trees, grape-pergolas, fruit trees and cascading vines. They are inter-connected with passageways and promenades, branching outward from his living quarter apartments. The entire creative complex is widely recognized for its originality and uniqueness. (National Register Nomination 3-28-77).

The significance of the underground home and gardens complex lies in its uniqueness, its ecological sophistication and its statement of exceptional individual creativity. It has educational value, which derives from all three of these dimensions...The environment is sculptural, but creates definite spaces with architectural merit...Sun, space and gardens are incorporated into a coherent entity for human habitation...Earth, vegetation, heat, water and light provide an economic habitable and ecological solution that offers lessons to school children, architects and all citizens facing the prospects of living in an energy-conserving world...Thus, the gardens are a study in the maturation of a design and construction ability in an individual artisan and designer. (State Landmark Architectural Supplement 10-12-77).

Simply put, the gardens complex is an "artistic environment", imaginatively designed and artistically created. And, like any

existing art-form, it is simply there and must therefore speak for itself without too much verbalization and expounding of the self-evident. Each viewer must extract and absorb for himself its significance, according to his own aesthetic capacity and cultural background.

Visiting architects have attempted to identify the gardens as "terratecture", an ecological earthen structure with architectural and conservational implications. Visiting artists, sculptors and writers attempt to describe it as "terra sculpture", a form of walk-in, walk-around sculpture. Although such terms are not explicitly descriptive, they do help define a merger of two conceptual art-formations. Whatever terms are used to help convey its significance, the fact remains that there is created a unique "artistic environment"- pleasing to the senses, with surrounding aesthetic spaces and artistic vistas. And it is evident an inter-related and inter-disciplinary harmony has been incorporated throughout. (California Landmark Nom.10-12-77).

In its totality, the underground home and gardens is a physical representation of the lifestyle and personality of its creator. Conceptually and aesthetically, it is an autobiography of a very unique person. It reflects a thoroughly independent and individualistic spirit unbounded by conventionality. It is an imprint of a totally sincere and unpretentious life. It represents in a graphic but gentle manner one's coming to terms with his environment and co-existing harmoniously. (California Landmark Nomination 10-12-77).

The gardens complex ~~xxxxxx~~ exemplifies a simpler rural life of the 1920's and earlier. It reflects a gentler time unhurried and unlike the more frenetic pace of modern contemporary life of the 1980's. It is also indicative of rural lifetimes when self-reliance, self-subsistence and self-sufficiency were much more commonplace. It typifies an era of our historical past when people, who lived in rural settings, lived off the bounty of the land as well.

Currently, the underground gardens property is in private ownership; but the public interest vested in this unique historic property and the public benefit derived from the preservation of its cultural, aesthetic and other aspects transcends certain exclusionary rights. Private ownership cannot be viewed as an obstacle to public participation in its preservation. Because of the aesthetic enrichment it offers and because of the enhancement it offers to the quality of our lives,..."it becomes a matter of public concern". Historic deed restrictions, historic easements, public access guarantees per annum as well as per long term specified-time period may be attached to this unusual California Landmark and National Register Site, whereby the public interest is protected and the public benefit is explicitly guaranteed. Its further placement in an Historic Property Preserve may be an added assurance of its preservation.

SYSTEM/COMPONENT- 1.

The underground gardens facility is part of the Recreational System, because it attracts and stimulates visitors of all backgrounds and from various cultures. It has recreational value and merit because of its aesthetic, artistic and edifying attributes. Its universal appeal best attests to its recreative qualities. It provides traveling motorists with more than just a roadside respite and diversion. Traveling motorists and visitors alike are provided with a thoroughly unique experience.

Its prime recreational value lies in its aesthetic encounter. Visitors are immersed in an aesthetic environment; they experience a hiatus from the hectic and frenzied pace of contemporary living. They are afforded an opportunity to pause and ponder for a brief moment some universal realities about aesthetics. By becoming literally and physically ^{enveloped} by such an environment, visitors are provided with a meta-physical experience, a transcendent experience that enriches the quality of life. It enhances and humanizes our hearts. It induces a reverence for aesthetics and the artistic process. It sublimates a reverence for human

determination and perseverance. And produces a reverential regard for our historical past, for the nobility of work and for the artistic ~~process~~ ^{effect}. Being captivated in such a creative and artistic environment provides an ennobling, educative and recreative experience.

In its own simple and sincere way, the gardens is a message for people of all ages and from all cultures. It is inspirational. It is uplifting of heart and spirit. It unleashes the imagination and provokes visions of variability and adaptability. Each visitor translates its message according to his own depth of experience. Its universal appeal lies in its genuine earthy simplicity and sincerity- in a material world dominated by plasticity, artificiality and superficiality.

SYSTEM/COMPONENT- 2.

The gardens complex is part of the Ecological/Conservational System. It exemplifies how one person came to terms with his environment. It exemplifies how he moderated his environment without it being done violence. How he shaped it; how he combined earth, vegetation, sun and water to suit his fancy and lifestyle. And how he learned to live in peaceful harmony and ^{fruitful} co-existence.

The eco-conservational aspects of the underground gardens are graphically illustrated by the fact that almost every tree, every shrub and vine originally planted still lives. Still flowers. And still bears fruit. Many of them, after more than seventy years. They were sheltered from the scorching summer sun and shielded from the killing frosts of winter. They flourished in a moderated environment. They are provided a variety of habitats with micro-climates of their own.

Air, light and heat are manipulated and controlled to climatize specific areas for human habitation as well as plant life. The venturi-concept is frequently employed. Its inverted conic-shaped openings, in the living spaces especially, create drafts

of rising convection currents of air. The insulating qualities and characteristics of earth and vegetation are capitalized and used creatively and effectively.

SYSTEM/COMPONENT- 3.

The underground gardens complex is part of the Educational System, because all age groups can profit from its multi-disciplinary educative implications. It provides elemental lessons of specific educational value inherent in its aesthetical, structural and ecological-conservational characteristics.

The creation of its earthen spaces by a process of subtraction has sculptural as well as architectural merit. Its universal appeal excites personal identification with its basic simplicity. Its method of construction dates back to the early Babylonian-Assyrian era of Western Asia with the use of the simple uncentered arch, vault and dome. The simple wall constructions are variations of cyclopean, mycenae and curvilinear patterns. Many of the arches, vaults and domes were built with little or no centering, but the use of the more sophisticated centered Roman arch and dome is also prevalent.

The physical and structural characteristics of the gardens provide an exemplary three-dimensional lesson on the early history of architecture. It graphically illustrates a progression of development from a free-formed style, without regard for geometrical symmetry, to a proportionate centered and symmetrical style. The two styles of arches, vaults and domes are then combined and varied for effect and optical balance and illusion.

Earth, vegetation, sun, heat and water are the basic ingredients of its eco-conservational significance. Its varied and adaptive uses reveal an exploratory, maturational and aesthetic sensitivity of definite educational merit. Collectively, its recreative and aesthetic value, its sculptural and architectural merit together with its eco-conservational implications makes the underground gardens complex a unique educational medium. It underscores an inter-disciplinary approach to education opposed to a single disciplinary orientation.

MISCELLANEOUS CONCLUSION.

This analysis of the significance and the identification of the major component/implications of Forestiere Underground Gardens does not address itself to current existing conditions of the premises. The overall physical condition of the gardens complex is visibly threatened with serious impairment. It now exist in various stages of debilitation and disrepair. Specific areas of destabilization and deterioration have resulted over the years. The ravages of time and erosion by the elements for the past some seventy years^s has taken its toll and continues to pose a threat to its physical integrity. Immediate protective measures are required to arrest further destabilization and deterioration. Specific areas in need of critical repairs (identified early in 1978) require immediate preservation and restoration measures to halt futher impairment, resulting from erosion and percolation.

A detailed Comprehensive Study and/or Feasibility Study may be the only way to refine the components outlined and to define various program and projects consonant with the its aesthetic and thematic character also cursorily outlined here. Included in such a detailed study might be defining compatible uses and originally contemplated developments enhancing its overall character and atmosphere. Central to such uses might be the immediate rehabilitation of the Mediterranean Room with related facilities to permit meetings of various civic, historical, art and music groups and to provide facilities for various art-shows, craft and handiwork displays and exhibits, chamber music and related performances on a year round basis. Such events dramatized in such a setting would underscore the cultural and historical significance of preservation and its inherent value.

A long-ranged Comprhensive Master Plan might center around the restoration of the old lake and water-garden as it formerly existed, complimented with its wine-garden and/or wine-pavilion. Other compatible facilities might include a farmers type fruit and vegetable market, a nursery and garden center, a wine cellar, wine and cheeze tasting room, a pottery and crafts studio, a library-bookstore on eco-conservational and solar technology with related soft-ware etc etc- all would have to be in keeping with the existing atmosphere and thematic character set by the gardens originator and creator.