The New American Garden: The Landscape Architecture of Oehme, van Sweden
National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.
17 October 2015–1 May 2016

Traditional garden design in the Mid-Atlantic states was fundamentally challenged in the late twentieth century with the work of the Washington, D.C.–based firm Oehme, van Sweden and Associates, established in 1975. This photographic exhibition illuminated unconventional garden making generated by the firm’s two larger-than-life cofounders, Wolfgang Oehme (1930–2011) and James van Sweden (1935–2013).

The exhibition celebrated the twenty-five-year anniversary of the 1990 publication of Bold Romantic Gardens, written by Oehme and van Sweden with Susan Rademacher, former executive director of Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservatory. The book introduced the world to the Oehme, van Sweden signature style of planting design defined by broad painterly strokes of hardy perennials and ornamental grasses set within strong architectural frameworks.

Oehme, van Sweden’s design sensibility was in sharp contrast to the lawn-centric landscapes of postwar suburban America. The firm’s earliest clients were wealthy nonconformists with the self-confidence to make art statements with their gardens. Its first high-profile commission came in 1977 with the Federal Reserve Board Garden in Washington, D.C. (Figure 1). Just steps from Pennsylvania Avenue and the National Mall, this public garden was revolutionary, planted with thousands of species of Miscanthus, Calamagrostis, Rudbeckia, and many other naturalistic genera. The garden was still a sensation ten years later, when serious Washingtonians objected to it as unsuitable for a public building in the nation’s capital.

At first impression, the exhibition was simultaneously overwhelming and intimate. Visitors were immediately confronted with a full-size reproduction (103 inches by 112 inches) of an abstract landscape painting by Helen Frankenthaler, Nature Abhors a Vacuum (1973). Frankenthaler’s rich color palette was designed into the exhibition and repeated on entire wall panels, on floor risers, and in many of the garden images. In contrast, the scale of the exhibition photographs was intimate, 24 inches by 36 inches or smaller, which had the effect of beckoning viewers to come closer and then rewarding their attention with detail, texture, and light. The firm’s meticulous handling of detail in the selection of materials, crafted garden structures, and patterns of paving was evident in every photograph.

Wolfgang Oehme and James van Sweden were lively personalities in Washington, socially and professionally. Oehme was ever the high-spirited, exuberant plantsman. Van Sweden was charismatic and energetic, a consummate self-promoter. The occasional portrait, snapshot-like, showed them in the field smiling, drawings or tools in hand. The exhibition emphasized their activities as engaged gardeners. Together they founded a landscape typology that they believed was a balance between architecture and horticulture. It was the recognition of the intimacy of their garden making—hand dug, hand built, hand planted—that shaped the exhibition.

Van Sweden credited Dr. H. Marc Cathey, director of the United States National Arboretum, with coining the term “new American garden.” Cathey appreciated the investment Oehme and van Sweden made in their gardens by bringing good horticultural practices into design and pioneering the treatment of the entire landscape as a garden. “Oehme, van Sweden’s style is revolutionary,” Cathey wrote, “because they have shown us the beauty of the entire life cycle of a plant. These gardens come into their own from August into December, when all around nature is destroying itself in the annual cycle of senescence. Their gardens, after the first frost, enter a whole new stage of aged beauty.”

The exhibition space at the National Building Museum was compact, designed in three modestly scaled rooms and loosely organized by project type. “Early Works” included a few private gardens and the Federal Reserve Board Garden, “Residential Gardens” comprised a selection that spanned the Eastern Seaboard between South Carolina and Massachusetts, and “Civic and Commercial Commissions” extended throughout the United States. In the gardens of Oehme, van Sweden, the quality of light and the control of light are as important as the plant selection. Therefore, the curatorial decision to mat and frame each photograph in white was an excellent one; this presentation bounced more light onto the images, whereas black mats and frames might have given more weight to the colors.

The traveling version of the exhibition featured only the fifty-two garden photographs, but at the National Building Museum debut, the photographs were supplemented with a variety of materials. The inclusion of original renderings and sets of construction drawings facilitated an
appreciation for the design process for a few projects, such as the Federal Reserve Board Garden. But privately owned sculpture such as Henry Moore’s Torso, from the Rosenberg Garden, and Oehme, van Sweden–designed furniture and planting containers were spatially out of scale and did not strengthen the key themes of the exhibition.

Sadly, nine of the twenty-one gardens featured in *Bold Romantic Gardens* were lost during Oehme’s and van Sweden’s lifetimes, through ownership changes, lack of maintenance, or real estate conflicts. The exhibition closed with a nod toward the stewardship of the firm’s built legacy. Oehme and van Sweden maintained ongoing collaborations with their patrons (often for decades), and because they wrote extensively, they left a deep appreciation for their design and stewardship philosophies. The successor firm, renamed OEHME, van SWEDEN | OvS, has moved forward with awareness of the tenuous and temporal nature of gardens. Landscapes are designed to change with time. The exhibition reinforced awareness of the bonds among architectural structure, horticulture, and stewardship that are essential to the Oehme, van Sweden vision.

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**Related Website**


**Notes**


**A Japanese Constellation: Toyo Ito, SANAA, and Beyond**

*Museum of Modern Art, New York*  
13 March–31 July 2016

The most significant artifact in the MoMA exhibition *A Japanese Constellation: Toyo Ito, SANAA, and Beyond* was not one of the sumptuous architectural models, or any of the precise orthographic drawings, but a small, hand-drawn sketch. The sketch—labeled “Toyo Ito and Surroundings,” signed by Ito himself and dated 9 September 2012—depicts a series of interesting circles, each containing the name of an architect or engineer (Figure 1). Ito places his own name in the largest circle, at the center. Around him orbit smaller circles with the names of figures who worked for or with him.

Placed prominently at the entrance of the exhibition, the sketch served as both a conceptual and a practical diagram of the show. Its overlapping circles suggest relationships and connections between the architects and engineers (the names of the latter appear in circles drawn with dashed lines), de-emphasizing individuals in favor of their adjacencies and commonalities. As the exhibition’s curators, Pedro Gadanho and Phoebe Springstubb, wrote in their introductory wall text, the show “maps a network of architects who gravitate around Toyo Ito (born 1941) and SANAA, the office founded in 1995 by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa.” These architects include Sou Fujimoto, Akihisa Hirata, and Junya Ishigami. The text stressed the themes that link the architects’ careers, their shared location in and around Tokyo, and, above all, “Ito’s influence as a mentor.”

The constellation is a provocative trope around which to organize an architectural exhibition and a suggestive modifier to the always slippery notion of influence. Solar constellations inscribe recognizable forms onto random arrays of stars; as the framework for the show, constellation promises that some kind of pattern will emerge, that connections will be made between the various figures. This is an admirable and unusual ambition for an installation of this type, and a shift from recent architectural exhibitions at MoMA that have focused either on geographic frameworks, such as the magisterial *Latin America in Construction: 1955–1980* (2015), or a single architect, as in *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* (2013). In the exhibition catalogue, Gadanho writes that he brought the idea for the show with him when he was hired as the curator of contemporary architecture at MoMA in 2012. Gadanho has since left MoMA to become the inaugural director of the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology in Lisbon.

The exhibition gathered together work from almost all of the architects depicted in Ito’s sketch. The stated focus was on the twenty-first century, although projects from the 1990s were included as well. Each architect was given a “room” in the exhibition, demarcated by full-height screens of

**Figure 1** Oehme, van Sweden, Federal Reserve Board Garden, Washington, D.C., 1978 (photo by Amy Lamb, 2015; courtesy The Cultural Landscape Foundation).