

Calder Gardens: Reviewing the Reviews and More

By Sean O'Rourke

"That others grasp what I have in mind seems unessential as long they have something else in theirs." - Alexander (Sandy) Calder

It was difficult last fall to avoid the publicity for the Calder Gardens on the Parkway. Rightfully so, everyone was excited about it, and the museum did a great job of making sure everyone knew it was opening. I thought I could write something about my experience visiting it for the first time. But as autumn turned to winter, I hadn't got around to visiting, and I noticed how everywhere I looked, someone was writing about their own visits. Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, Chloe Schama in *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* all had their say. Of course, the architectural journals contributed pieces, and Philadelphia's own Inga Saffron had her "take" on the experience.

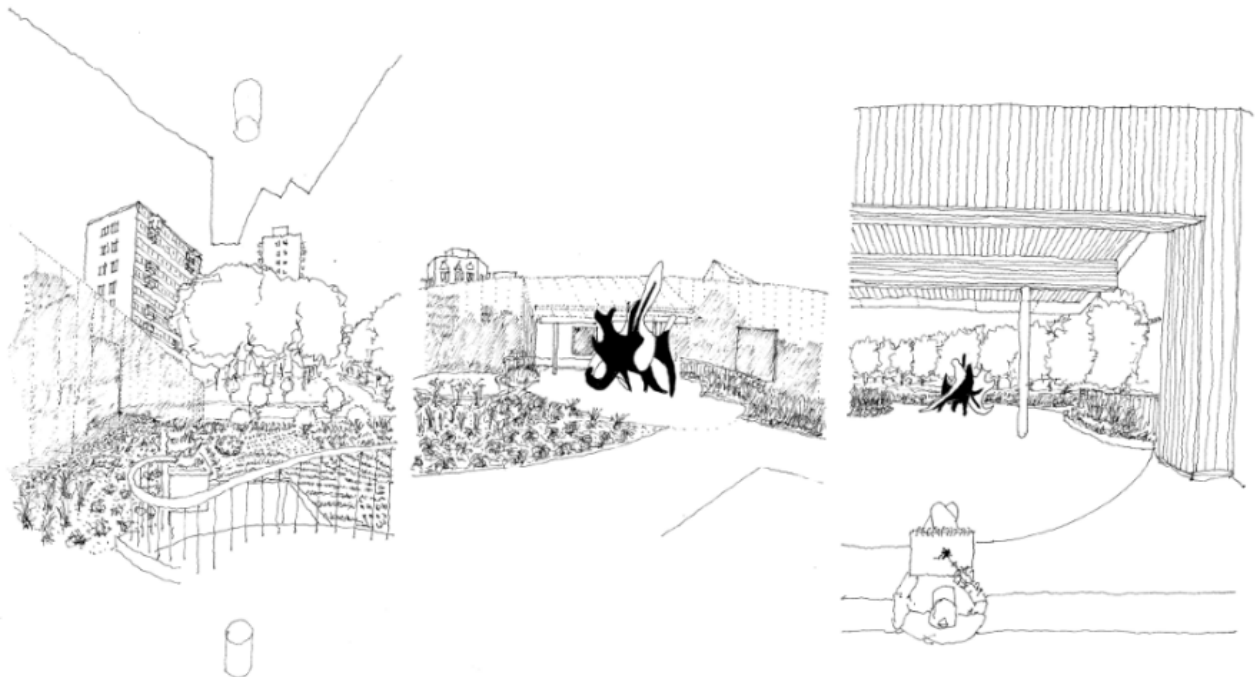


Figure 1. Exterior sketches of Calder Gardens. (Sean O'Rourke)

I initially avoided reading them so as not to bias my own future visit. And then I went: walked through the garden and museum, sketched fitfully throughout, and returned home with no great epiphanies but a collection of thoughts.

At that point, I tried to read all the accounts of everyone else's visits that I could access through the variety of pay walls on the web. Here is what I took away from reading what others thought, and my own observations from my visits.

My first readings were the high-profile magazines. Adam Gopnik wrote about his visit in *The New Yorker*, Chloe Schama in *Vogue*, Martin Filler in *The New York Review of Books*. All of them touched lightly on the architecture and context while emphasizing the unique intention of the organizers to create something that contravened the typical museum experience. An experience that "encourages contemplation and self-discovery"--primarily by removing the labels, art titles, and explanatory texts one expects to find in most museums.

When they wrote about architectural concerns, I felt like they were off base. Chloe described some of the spaces as "cathedral-like," and I could only imagine she has never walked into the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul farther down the Parkway, because I found nothing cathedral-like in Calder Gardens. While Martin commended the "scrupulous segregation" of Calder's sculpture and the natural garden, he complained that "such juxtapositions often do little to enhance either." I thought the opposite. He was also enamored with the "well-nigh perfect equilibrium among art, architecture, and landscape." I didn't leave my visits with the same level of affection for this balance. Jessica Holmes, in the *Brooklyn Rail*, acknowledged Calder Gardens' intent to offer a "new way to consider art in an ostensibly institutional space" with a sense of its powerful model of a "contemplative and dialogical third place in public life." Again, she said less about the architecture and made what seemed to me to be an unrealistic aspirational stretch. It is only a museum that does things a little bit differently.

The architectural reviewers were more interesting to me, but mild in their criticism. Aaron Betsky, in *Architect*, praised the great design but had small quibbles about details. Aaron described the experience as "quite breathtaking." Honestly, nothing took my breath away when I walked around. It was almost as if the architectural critics were reluctant to be overtly critical of the building at the risk of losing friends or ruining industry networks. Izzy Kornblatt, in the *Architectural Record*, wrote without much opinion about his experience until the last paragraph where he hinted at a strong view. "Yet the paradox of this project is that its very rejection of the museum paradigm—its forgoing of a permanent collection that could be freely sited and made freely available to the public—forces it to retreat from the civic ambitions shared by three generations of sculptors, back into the hermetic space of the museum." Interestingly, Izzy ties the unique programming vision and institutional structure to the building's deficiency of civic character.



Figure 2. Interior sketches of Calder's work. (Sean O'Rourke)

Andrew Russeth, in *The New York Times*, was complimentary in his own way: "It is an ennobling funhouse, with a zest for drama." He was willing to let time decide if it will be a success. Inga Saffron, in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, was similarly easy on the criticism and heavy on the description. She, like Chloe, described one of the interior spaces as a "stunning, cathedral-scaled room," which I just don't feel anywhere in the museum. And she imagined how Oudolf's garden will improve the Parkway by providing comfortable places to hang out. But I would suggest, as others have, too, that this isn't a "park," and with just a couple of benches in the garden and single path to the front door, it is hardly a place to hang out in. Inga does elaborate well on how the building relates to the Parkway and to the Vine Street Expressway, using a design tactic of our very own Robert Venturi. I understand the design intent but am more willing to admit it isn't appropriately used here.

Oliver Wainwright, in *The Guardian*, seemed to me to be the only architectural critic willing to describe and criticize equally. Does he describe the experience? Yes, in a single pithy sentence—more succinctly than everyone else, “It is part barn, part cave and part rolling meadow, compressing a whole universe of different gallery types into one compact encounter.” And Oliver rightly proceeds to interrogate the Foundation’s intentions and compare them to the resulting experience. I feel attuned to his judgement. “There is a palpable restlessness on show throughout the complex. At times it can feel like too many ideas crammed into too small a space, a virtuosic display of Herzog & de Meuron’s greatest hits, populated by incidental Calder’s.

However, when Oliver steps outside I want to fuss about his critical description. He describes the museum’s arrival sequence as, “worlds away from the nearby neoclassical cultural piles that line Philadelphia’s Parkway Museum District—a misnomer for an inhospitable ribbon of highways, sliced through this part of the city in the 1920’s.” First of all, the “neoclassical cultural piles” he disparages may not be perfect buildings, but I find there are an interesting range of paths through and up into them. Try it one day. Walk from the sidewalk up and into any of the institutional buildings on the Parkway: the Free Library, Franklin Institute, Rodin Museum, the Cathedral, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Sorry Academy of Sciences.) Based on those visits, you could teach a class about how to enter a building and be enthralled by the experience. Oliver doesn’t give them the credit they deserve. And none of them is as stubbornly mean spirited as the modernist, flawed gem of the Barnes Foundation, in its relationship to the Parkway.

Interestingly, the architectural historian Michael Lewis, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, best explicates the problematic relationship of the museum with our city. “Calder Gardens, for all the undoubted talent and imagination it displays, sadly turns its back on its Parkway context with a self-satisfied aloofness. Here is a lost opportunity of tragic scale. At one end of the Parkway is the work of Calder’s grandfather, Alexander Milne Calder, whose figure of William Penn crowns City Hall. In the middle is the superb Swann Memorial Fountain, created by his father, Alexander Stirling Calder. On axis with them is Calder’s own mobile he called “Ghost,” dominating the main hall of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Here is Calder’s own family tree, expressed in terms of monumental urbanism. Yet no attempt is made to connect to it through sightlines or paths of movement. Nor does Calder Gardens relate to the other nearby museums in scale, materials or character. The Parkway might as well have been concealed behind a giant curtain during the design process for all the notice the architect took of it. In the end, his building has no more formal relationship with it or its host city than would a traveling circus.”

Diana Lind, an urban policy specialist writing in *The Philadelphia Citizen*, doubled down on Michael’s criticism. She was frustrated that her concerns about the way the project disrespected the park and Philadelphia were overlooked by most of the other reviews. She asked herself, “Was I unable to enjoy world class architecture and very nice things?” (I so empathized with her—have I lived in Philadelphia so long I just want to complain?) More importantly I feel that she pinpointed why the project so widely missed the mark with respect to its context. “This may be in part due to the fact that the project was sketched at hotels in

Munich and New York, among other locales, during the isolating pandemic.” Which begs the questions, who was representing Philadelphia in the design discussions--who could push the architect to better appreciate the context of the site?

When all is said and done, I couldn't walk through the building without bringing with me an unease of its relationship with the Parkway. So I will save my concerns about the interior experience for another day. Before I went inside, while sitting under the entry roof to avoid the hot sun on one of the few garden benches, I could imagine what was across the street and behind the lines of mature Parkway trees, and I had a simple epiphany. What seems obvious to me, as a Philadelphian, is how in size, program, and site context, this project is so similar to the museum on the other side of the Parkway: the Rodin Museum. And almost everyone failed to mention it. (Andrew Russeth does reference the other museum across the street, rightfully recognizing it as the “antithesis of this new endeavor’s venturesome design.”)

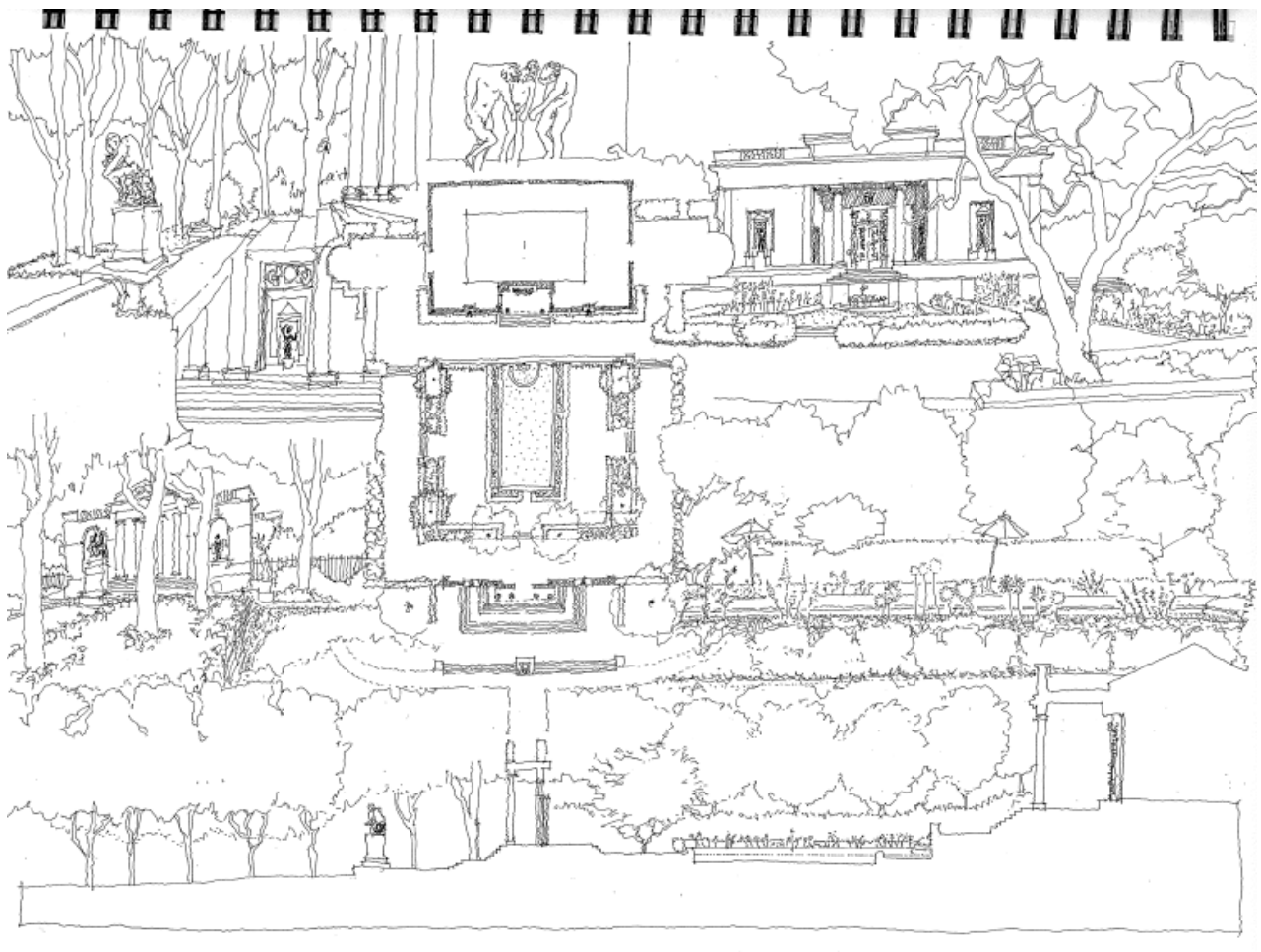


Figure 3. Exterior sketches of Rodin Museum. (Sean O'Rourke)

The Rodin Museum is another museum building on the Philadelphia Parkway that is devoted to a single artist's work. Jules Mastbaum commissioned Paul Cret (architect) and Jacques Gréber (landscape architect) to design the building and gardens to house his collection of Auguste Rodin's work. Because Calder Gardens is an "anti-museum" designed by Herzog & de Meuron (architect) and Piet Oudolf (garden designer) to house Alexander (Sandy) Calder's work, a "compare and contrast" activity is enlightening. Briefly, the above grade footprints of the two buildings seem almost the same square footage, and both are pushed off the Parkway as far as their sites allow. HdM hide their building behind a fuzzy mirror façade (except for its warm, wood-clad entry feature), while allowing the meadow garden to fill the slow slope upwards from the parkway sidewalk to the building. Cret designed a stand-alone gateway close to the Parkway as its entry portico, an in-your-face announcement of the museum and the backdrop for a very public Rodin sculpture ("The Thinker"). Between this entry and the Beaux-Arts museum lies Gréber's garden.

Though I can't wait for Piet Oudolf's garden to grow into its full-season, naturalistic beauty it is difficult for me to imagine it as the place that everyone is describing as meditative. It is behind a short chain link fence with paths that slope slowly from the street sidewalks up to the front door. There are three benches that stand on the paths, and apparently no shade trees near them. I can't meander through the garden without quickly ending up at the front entry porch or back on the sidewalk. I am not sure I would ever call it meadow-like; there just isn't that enough space for more than aspirational vignettes of meadow plantings. I can't imagine relaxing contemplatively on one of the benches either. Even if I am lucky enough to get a seat, I am sitting on a direct path to and from the front doors.

Gréber's landscape/garden is no field of naturalistic plantings. Cret bookended it on the short sides with his museum building and the freestanding gateway at the parkway edge, so it feels like an outdoor room. Gréber added traditional garden amenities like a fountain and spaces that accommodate tables and chairs, and he landscaped inside and around the space beautifully. At the open long sides of the space, which are marked only by simple metal fences, it is difficult to determine what landscape belongs to the museum and what is part of the Parkway; they are layered together well. Of course, its maturity is the reward for sustained investment in landscape. The flexibility of seating, the varied elevations encountered as one walks through and around the space, its mixture of sunniness and shade, and colors and textures of seasonal plantings are beautiful-- and an almost secret gift along the Parkway. The Rodin Museum, and the positive relationship among building and landscape and art is (as Russeth states in his article—although without passing judgement) the antithesis of the Calder Gardens. Most importantly, it does its best to relate to the Parkway in a positive manner. I feel like HdM either ignored the positive precedent of the Rodin or intentionally tried to do something different. In either case, the public realm suffers.



Figure 4. Spring view of the Kater Street garden. (Sean O'Rourke)

As for Oudolf's garden, I am looking forward to watching it grow and flourish and hope it is as stimulating as everyone expects. I want it to be nice, but I worry that like some trending architectural design interests, this is just the newest fad in landscape. And like many things in Philly, we are behind the fashion curve and just catching up with the rest of world. But I think about Oudolf's garden every Saturday morning as I walk into Center City from South Philly. Behind the ugliest parking garage on South Street, on the north side of Kater Street between the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Street, is a swatch of landscape. It is about six feet wide, lying between the tall wall of garage on the north side and a high fence on its sidewalk side. It isn't a park, nor really a garden that you can walk through. Yet over time, and through someone's care (I imagine the folks who live on the block) it has been brought to life by the most diverse, wacky plantings tightly squeezed on a piece of land that I know of in Philadelphia. And whether intentionally or not, every season makes me look at it anew.



Figure 5. Spring view of the Kater Street garden. (Sean O'Rourke)

All this talk about Ouldolf's garden design has made me more appreciative of this sliver of landscape on a thin street in South Philadelphia. I am not a landscape architect, but I don't think the success of this garden is about using native, non-intrusive plants, nor is Ouldolf's design. And there is nothing formal or highly intentional about what is growing on Kater Street, while I understand that Ouldolf is highly selective. But I can feel the passion invested by its caretaker(s). In the summer, it reaches out through the fence with such varied growths—almost asking me to stop and touch them. My walk along the sidewalk is slowed as I wonder at it all. And even in the dead of winter, I see colors, textures, patterns—and the strangest plants—I can't help but smile! The landscape is not precious, but almost obscene in its beautiful fecund density. It reminds me of our city in many ways. I hope Calder Gardens will do the same.

Sean O'Rourke is an architect at Colliers Engineering & Design. He coauthored with Jerome Lukowicz, Philadelphia, *Portraits of the City*. Sean has lived, practiced, studied, and taught in Philadelphia since arriving here from college in 1984.