Carrying on the Tradition: The Legacy of African American Gardens in Detroit

Landscape architect Anne Spirn theorizes that “every landscape has both real and potential form – what is, what has been, and what will, what might be.” Vaughn Sills’ photographs of African American gardens and gardeners in her collection *Places for the Spirit* are powerful because they deftly mediate this tension, connecting us to the past, present, and possible futures. Her skillful compositions with gentle light, crisp focus, and tight frames invite us into intimate spaces, given consciousness and meaning not only through her lens, but by gardeners who use fragments of material culture and plant life as the basis for creating and giving spirit to place.

As a collection, Sills’ images are a distinct contribution to American landscape photography. They play a vital role in recognizing African Americans’ contributions to America’s cultural landscape through the practice of gardening. Historically, African Americans have often had to unlock the potential of the landscape through adverse circumstances that were all too real. The tradition of re-spiriting place that Sills captures connects her images to a rich history of African American gardening that has touched the soil here in Southeast Michigan, home to the city of Detroit and its evolving urban gardening scene.

African Americans moved to Detroit in large numbers during the Great Migration in the early 20th century. Their horticultural practices changed in response to these new living circumstances. Some stopped traditional gardening because urban-industrial life offered new opportunities to escape toiling on the land. There were those who adapted the familiar suburban lawn and others who continued to plant gardens as a means of subsistence, beautification, and place-making in a new environment. During the 1920s and 30s, the Detroit Urban League sought to build community and beautify yards by sponsoring garden contests in African American neighborhoods. According to one observer, houses in the Eight-Mile-Wyoming neighborhood were “surrounded by riots of bloom…porches and fences sag under the weight of rambler roses, honeysuckle, and clematis; the yards bloom with myriads of flowers.” While images of these gardens are sparse, we can begin to imagine the meanings and relevance of making place in this way by looking at Sills’ images.

African American women were often the primary gardeners in Detroit, a tradition that continued into the 1980s when a group of women known as the “Gardening Angels” (most of whom were senior citizens) began expanding their personal gardens onto a growing number of vacant lots in the city. Eventually, they created intergenerational community gardens where youth and elders bonded through conversations over gardening.

Today, reusing a landscape long neglected and thought to be abandoned, divided, and left without spirit, people of many different backgrounds are involved in community gardening projects across the city that aim to ‘re-spirit’ this place. Much of the contemporary movement is framed around growing food, such as at the D-Town Farm and Manistique Community Garden. As they transform the land – and in turn themselves - Detroit’s contemporary urban gardeners
continue a tradition of gardening with unyielding spirit that Sills so artfully captures in her work, reminding us that unlocking the potential of what will and what might be can only be done with attention to the past and creative action in the present.

- Joseph Cialdella is a PhD Candidate in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan. His dissertation, “Landscapes of Ruin and Repair: A Cultural History of Environmental Change in the Rust Belt” explores the history of parks and gardens in Detroit. He is currently the Enid A. Haupt Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Gardens.

Further Reading:

Glave, Dianne. “‘a garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design’: Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of An African American Environmental Perspective” in Environmental History, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Jul., 2003).


