

ART REVIEW A Metaphor Grows in 'Poetry Garden' * Designed by Minneapolis-based artist Siah Armajani, the 3,000-square-foot installation takes root on a vacant lot in Marina del Rey.

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Walking into "The Poetry Garden" is like walking into an orderly public park in a small Midwestern city.

And, into a dynamic Russian Constructivist stage set.

And, into the sequestered space of a Persian miniature.

And, into the hand-hewn enclosure of a California Mission courtyard.

And, finally, into assorted other spaces whose vaguely familiar identities are not immediately apparent, but which will likely reveal themselves over time. The garden's layered references peel back slowly, shifting subtle viewpoints like a Cubist collage. Designed by Minneapolis-based artist Siah Armajani, "The Poetry Garden" creates a gently contemplative experience that might be most simply diagramed as "this and this and this and this and" Individual sources in disparate cultures remain distinct and identifiable; yet, all have been woven together into a seamless whole that creates its own particular blend of pungent flavors.

As Armajani is a highly regarded public artist who has long insisted that public art should reflect this nation's particular ideals, it's not difficult to recognize the aspiration for his lovely garden. It's a living metaphor for the complex proposition of American democracy.

The 3,000-square-foot "Poetry Garden" was commissioned by the Lannan Foundation for its offices and exhibition gallery in an otherwise dull industrial park near Marina del Rey. Armajani was an inspired choice to design the space, hitherto an empty lot surrounded on three sides by tall, gray-stuccoed walls and on the fourth by the foundation's low-slung building. He's long used American literature as an inspiration for his art, and literature and art are the focus of the foundation's philanthropy.

Of course, in a neighborhood not noted for public amenities, it was simply good sense to engage one of our most gifted public artists to provide one. Armajani is an artist for whom usefulness is not a dirty word.

Littered with fiascoes, the field of public art has found one of its rare, protean American voices in the Iranian-

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Amid bland warehouses and architecturally cheesy office buildings, nothing in the immediate neighborhood of the industrial park is quite like the garden. Although modest in scale, enclosed on four sides and opening onto the street through wide gates at one corner, it feels like a public park. Its purple flower bed, aggregate paths and assorted trees create a formal pattern for the rectangular, ornamental garden.

A cruciform shape made from walkways surrounds a central, fenced flower bed, while the four grassy polygons around it are planted with three different varieties of green and red Japanese maples. A 25-foot waxy-leaf sweet shade stands off-center at the northwest end, while at the east end a 35-foot California live oak rises from a circular well in front of the entry gate. (Thomas A. Lockett was Armajani's landscape consultant.)

The "arms" of the cruciform pathway are not centered, nor is the placement of the maples and the sweet shade. Like vertical accent marks scattered across an asymmetrical plane, the trees animate a subtly dynamic space that leads to the grand exclamation point of the majestic oak.

The dynamism of the design is Russian Constructivist in spirit—a source most plainly evident in the beautiful, geometric pattern of the 16-foot-tall, blue-green gates, which rise around a massive, blue-granite boulder in the center of the entry. Who but Armajani would think of revolutionary Constructivist plans for circa 1920 information kiosks as useful models for garden design?

High-backed armchairs and benches, made from white steel frames and wooden slats of Alaskan cedar, which will soon weather to a silvery gray, surround the perimeter of the space. The horizontal slats transform the garden's stucco walls into clapboard expanses, fusing two traditional American building styles, while the benches recall both American Stickley and Dutch De Stijl furniture.

At the southeast corner, a break in the perimeter seating is filled by a row of 15 pairs of tall ceramic jars, glazed in striations of deep blue, emerald green and white. Backed with russet-colored Boston ivy, the sensuous pairs are stacked, lip to lip, like vaguely anthropomorphic sentinels.

The vessels are a key to a principal inspiration for the garden: Wallace Stevens' poem "The Anecdote of the Jar," whose three stanzas are printed in a single line of ceramic tile around the top of the high-backed seating. A meditation on the uneasy tensions between nature and culture, Stevens' poem will hover above the heads of visitors gathered for poetry readings to be held in the garden, or who have simply come to sit and ponder.

The small, densely packed flower bed is the heart of the space. Its fence is surmounted by four podiums from which readings can be given. A speaker can stand inside the flower bed and read outward; or, he can stand outside the flower bed and read across it, to an audience seated at the perimeter. Reminiscent of the perfumed imagery in Persian miniatures, this marvelous "garden within a garden" articulates a place in which a visitor is given the uncommon experience of being simultaneously inside and outside a luxuriously tended garden.

From the start, the New World has been mythologized as a New Eden. And, just as the eradication of formal

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