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Mr. Shadi's Garden: Expressing Love and Hope in the Landscape

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In 1938 Sundar Shadi bought a view lot on the Arlington in El Cerrito, CA, overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Today, the city's bay vistas play second fiddle to Mr. Shadi's garden, a gift he designs for the community on his one-acre hillside.

Every year, year round, every day, Mr. Shadi works on his projects. City residents treasure the spectacular seasonal metamorphosis that Mr. Shadi creates in his garden. Winter ends and spring comes to El Cerrito when Mr. Shadi erects his Easter cross and begins his annual planting. After weeks of his nourishing care, 15,000 flowers, planted in Indian and Persian rug designs, bloom bold color and it is summer. Mr. Shadi celebrates the fall harvest with a gardened Halloween scene. Fall unfolds into Christmas with a sculptured story depicting the pilgrimage to Bethlehem.

These seasonal displays are one man's offering to his community and region. His story is one to consider in light of Randy Hester's recent "Labors of Love" article, particularly as Mr. Shadi's garden offers new solutions to the creation of more loving and well loved environments.¹

Mr. Shadi

Mr. Shadi came to the United States from the Punjab in India, in the early 1920s to study pomology and subtropical horticulture at the University of California, Berkeley. He worked as a building contractor

in the East Bay until he retired in 1950. He is 85 years old.

Retirement cleared the way for many, many years of public service. For 22 years he organized a city-wide celebration of United Nations Day in El Cerrito. He has also served as a Parks and Recreation commissioner, as chairman of the talent show for the Richmond Unified School district, and as the Dad's Club district chairman.

His Gifts

One might think that some 20 years of community service would be gift enough. Mr. Shadi's most significant contribution, however, is the messages he sends out from his garden. These displays began with Christmas decorations 35 years ago, when Mr. and Mrs. Shadi first strung lights along the front eaves of their home and in the trees near the house. The next day they looked at the lights and decided a Star of Bethlehem would be nice, particularly if they were to perch it at the top of their hill so it could be seen from far away. The following year they ordered three pressed Masonite wise men from a catalogue for their front yard. The scene has grown each year since then.

Today the Christmas scene includes 67 life-sized sheep, 30 camels, 10 or 12 donkeys, a few goats, 2 shepherds, a dog for the shepherd, the star, and the entire *town* of Bethlehem (at least 90 houses), the wise men, an angel, and many pilgrims (see the Winter Plan). Mr. Shadi makes the figures from paper

"Mr. Shadi planting his rugs."
(Photograph by Randy Hester)

mâché; Mrs. Shadi sews their clothes. The attention to detail is extraordinary: the pilgrims carry jugs on their heads; the camels have elaborate saddles. This story, as Mr. Shadi calls it, is placed up on their steep hillside and is readily visible from the sidewalk, complete with a Bible for viewing parents to read the story of the birth of baby Jesus to their children.

At night lights and Christmas carols piped over a loud speaker enhance the story. An estimated 90,000 people come to see this scene every year. As early as November Mr. Shadi starts receiving calls from interested community groups from around the Bay region, many of whom arrive for the viewing in December in chartered buses. During the holidays the El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce is deluged with calls asking for Mr. Shadi's address.

After Christmas there is a lull in the activity outside. Inside, however, Mr. Shadi is busy preparing for his summer "rugs." The five rugs are made of flowers, 15,000 in all, and are arranged in Indian and Persian rug patterns, each in a 30-foot by 50-foot plot (see the Spring Plan). This project began 18 years ago when a neighbor told Mr. Shadi that his mixed flower and vegetable garden made a nice rug design.²

In the second week of March, Mr. Shadi starts to work outside on the spring garden. The terracing and planting takes 4 to 5 weeks, 11 to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week to complete. (When I called to set up

an interview he politely asked if I would call back in two weeks, that he had 15,000 flowers to plant.) The planning process is an exercise in abstract thinking. It begins with a sketch on a five- by eight-inch spiral pad in crayon. The sketch is drawn to show the desired forms and colors and notes the number of rows and types of annuals to use. (He originally would go to Montgomery Wards and Brueners to copy their rug designs, but in a few years exhausted their stock so now he designs his own patterns, different each year.) Mr. Shadi completes the process by translating the design into form on the ground with a piece of string and a tape measure.

When Mr. Shadi is ready to plant his rugs, he calls Lemuria Nursery in San Pablo to order the flowers: marigolds, lobelia, and verbena for the center medallions and viola and sweet alysum for the borders. The Lemurias special order from their suppliers, who are by now well aware of the customer ordering. The *only* constraint on this order is that all 15,000 of the flowers need to be the same size and to bloom all at the same time. In exchange for good service and a good price, Mr. Shadi advertises for his nurserymen every year by erecting a sign to tell viewers, "Flowers by Lemuria Nursery."

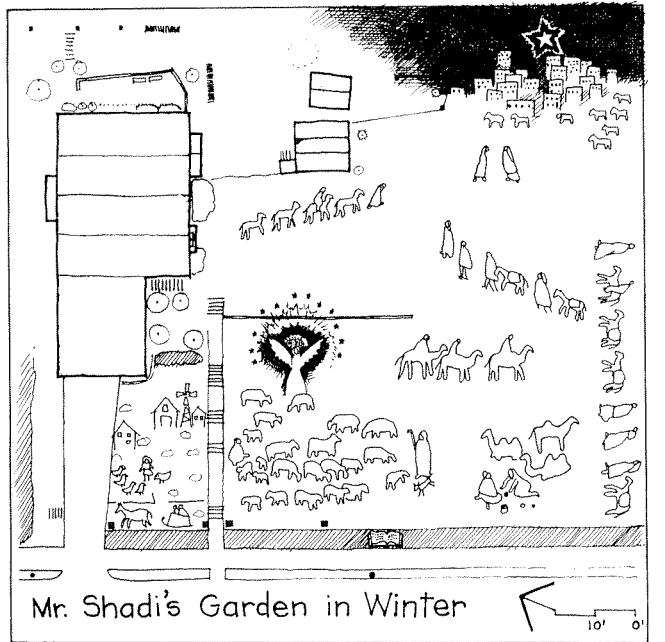
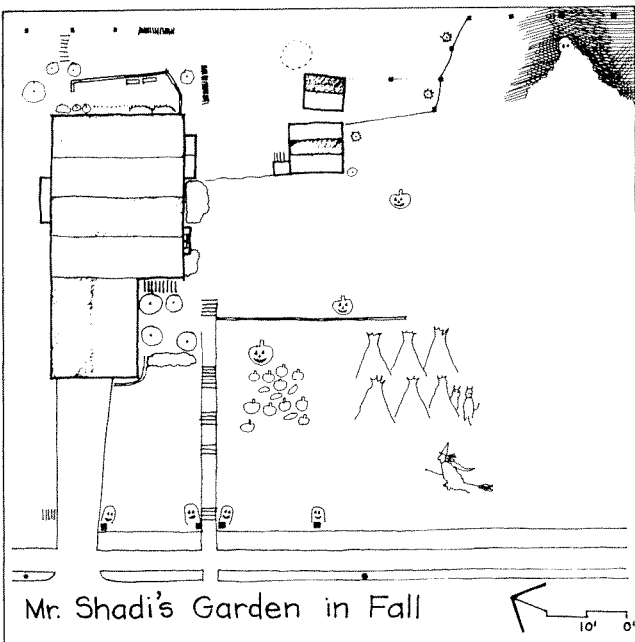
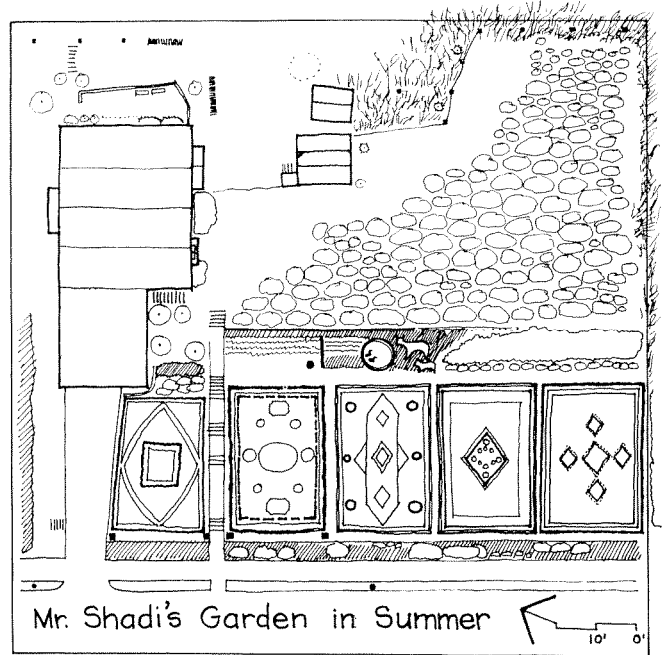
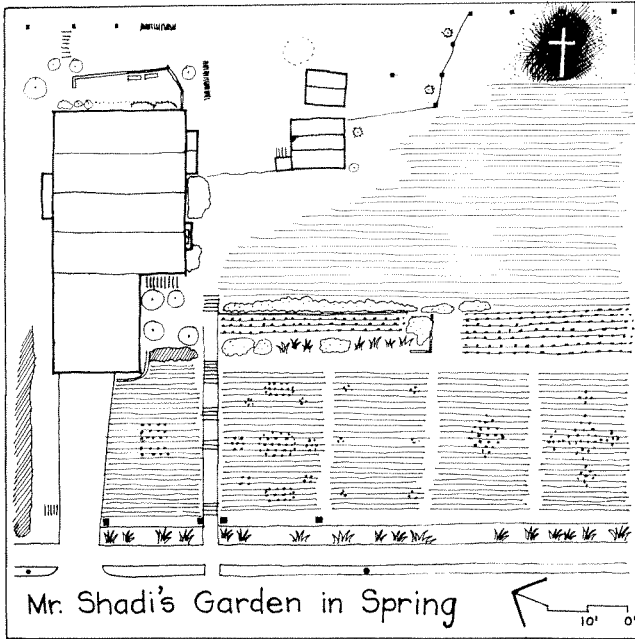
By mid-June the terraces have exploded with color (see the Summer Plan). The Shadis invite the local press to photograph the rugs, and the press lets the public know that the show is on. Some years Mr. Shadi creates an honorary

ensignia for a local civic group celebrating a significant anniversary, and invites the group to his home for a tea party and a tour.

Mr. Shadi is very conscious of seasonality and continuity. Each rug plan is dated, numbered, and photographed every year. His hillside exhibits a sense of time passing. Between the Christmas scene and the summer rugs, while the land lies waiting in terraces, he erects an Easter Cross on the top of his hill and decorates it with lights so that it can be seen from far away. In the fall, the compost from the summer's flowers both nourishes the soil and forms a protective cover for the otherwise muddy hill, making it easier to set up the Christmas story.

His Vision

When asked why he did all this, Mr. Shadi's response is simple. He says that he enjoys the work. When I asked Mr. Shadi why he didn't plant perennials and save himself a lot of trouble, he said that it would deprive him of the challenge of figuring out how to orchestrate the rugs so that every flower would bloom at the same time. He does the Christmas story because people tell him it just wouldn't seem like Christmas without it. Mr. Shadi was in the hospital last fall after he fell off a ladder, but had to hurry back to work to get the scene set up "because I didn't want to disappoint the people." He says that it makes him happy to see so many people enjoying his scenes. "If 80,000 or 90,000 people every year have seen the Christmas show, and



2a "Mr. Shadi's Garden in Spring."

(Sketches by Randy Hester)

2b "Mr. Shadi's Garden in Fall."

(Sketches by Randy Hester)

2c "Mr. Shadi's Garden in Summer."

(Sketches by Randy Hester)

2d "Mr. Shadi's Garden in Winter."

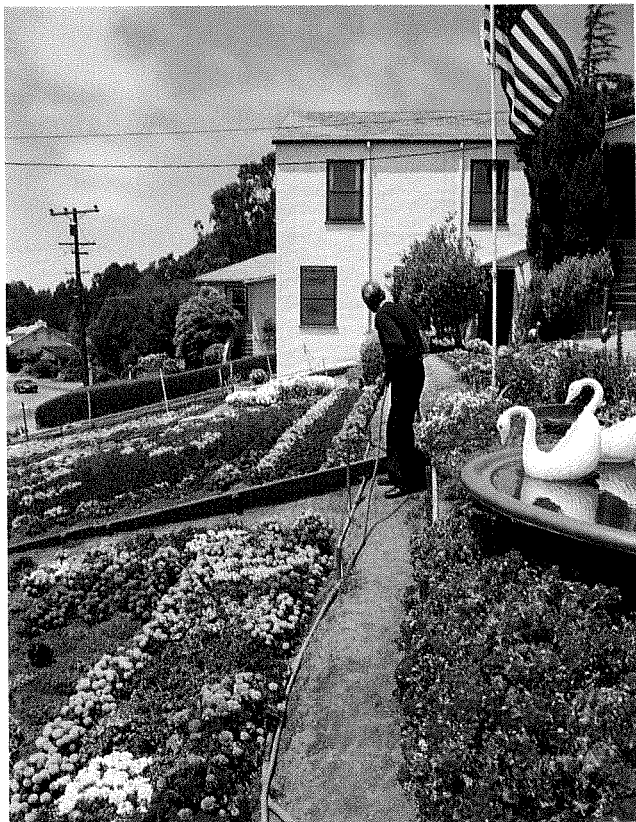
(Sketches by Randy Hester)



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3 "Spring's terraces awaiting Summer's splendor." (Photograph by Randy Hester)

4 "Mr. Shadi tending to his yard." (Photograph by Marcia McNally)



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5 "The 1984 Summer rugs." (Photograph by Marcia McNally)

6 "Christmas Angel." (Photograph by Randy Hester)

I've been doing it now for 35 years, just imagine how many millions have seen it by now!"

Mr. Shadi has a vision, a dream about what his town needs. Using noncontroversial and universally recognized forms to convey his message of love and hope for humanity, he has created images that a broad range of people can understand and ponder. The Bethlehem scene, for example, expresses the spiritual significance of Christmas for viewers, rather than the more common commercial themes associated with the holiday season. Mr. Shadi often uses the Persian rug forms to recognize, with honorary gardens, such international organizations as the United Nations and the Red Cross. "They are wonderful organizations, they do for children and the community. I do it to honor them."

Mr. Shadi has been made an honorary member of many civic groups. His neighbors, his town, the region, everyone who knows him, are crazy about him. Everyone I spoke with, whether a newspaper reporter, a neighbor passing by, a curious tourist, *everyone* said something nice about him: "Oh, you have no idea how famous he is . . . he's such a lovely man. . . ." When I called City Hall to get some information, the secretary said, "Oh, I hope you send us a copy of your article, we're real fans of his down here!" The first day I visited his home, a neighbor stopped her car in the middle of the street and called out, "Hello Mr. Shadi, we're going to just sit here and watch you work for a little while. The children

love to watch the flowers grow." One neighbor told me that he had moved up to the Arlington so he could live by Mr. Shadi. "The rugs are really gorgeous," he said, "aren't they? He has a wonderful philosophy of life. He shares his compassion for the world through the beauty of his art."

Community Issues

In a significant way, Mr. Shadi's labors differ from those described by Hester. He is not cast in an adversarial role with the community. It can be argued that he has not needed community support to execute his projects, that he acts as a private citizen on private property. Yet support has been critical to his continued success.

For example, the neighbors do not complain about the traffic generated by his Christmas story. The local police department has given him a sawhorse "No Parking" sign to put out on the road whenever he feels the need, which he says isn't often. "People are reasonable," he says, "they park on the side roads and walk." It is amazing that there is no conflict, because the Arlington is a major traffic corridor for the El Cerrito hill area and has only one lane in each direction.

At Christmas, Mr. Shadi is careful not to irritate his neighbors. He keeps the lights and music on from 6 to 10 pm only "so that people can sleep." He dismantles the scene on December 27th so that he won't "annoy" the community after the holiday.

When asked whether he feels that he has ever faced any obstacles in creating his hillside scenes, Mr. Shadi talks mostly of weather damage and vandalism. He says that he hasn't had much of a problem with either. Ten of his Christmas figures have been stolen, but most of them were returned. Mr. Shadi explains that people don't damage the scenes because they think they are lucky for and valuable to the community.

The issue of transferring the gardens from the creator to the community is more complicated. Mr. Shadi usually does not use the community as a resource, although many people offer their help. (But he says, they can only work on Saturdays, while he works all week long, or they lack gardening skills.) The Indian rug gardens have not been a participatory effort (Mrs. Shadi laughs, "During this time of year, there is clearly room for only one gardener . . ."). Mrs. Shadi does contribute to the Christmas story, in making the clothes. The local high school sends a few boys every year to help move the Christmas figures, each of which weighs up to 185 pounds. However, Mr. Shadi arranges the figures himself to make them look more "natural."

While it is certainly easier to realize a dream if it is done privately, what will happen in a few years? Mr. Shadi will not be able to continue at his current pace indefinitely. Who will tend to his labors then? Mr. Shadi's garden raises the old issue of placelessness in our everyday environments in a new

way. It is a special place. In the summer it blazes and sparkles with color. Mr. Shadi's ability to orchestrate the effect of his rugs is marvelous. Tens of thousands come to see these attractions every year in El Cerrito, a community whose other points of interest include public buildings, a shopping center, and several parks. In neighboring Berkeley, only 50,000 people visit the city's Rose Garden each year, only 50,000 visit the university's Botanical Garden. Mr. Shadi's garden gives the area's residents a place to take visitors, a place to show off and be proud of.

Of course broad-based advocacy for this type of labor of love raises another issue. This labor of love is done on private land, by a private citizen, with private funds. Yet, without stretching the definition too much, Mr. Shadi's garden is El Cerrito's most popular "public" open space. Should the city subsidize such an obvious gift to the community? Although the community benefits tremendously from Mr. Shadi's garden, he bears the cost of the flowers (\$1,000 a year), the electric and water bills, and the maintenance, etc.

Public funding, however, could come with strings attached. It is conceivable that in the multicultural East Bay pressure to produce different scenes with different messages could cost Mr. Shadi the control over his garden. Moreover, at what point would official recognition of his projects become an invasion of privacy? Mr. Shadi's garden does not appear on the Chamber of Commerce's map as a



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7 "Neighbors coming out to look at Christmas scene at night." (Photograph by Mike Maloney, courtesy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*)

point of interest, yet his address is given out routinely to interested callers.

Maybe it is time to look to private labors of love as a path to modifying the alienating environments we have created in suburbs over the past 30 years. Mr. Shadi's garden is certainly an innovative medium for relating his message of hope for humanity. It is one man's, one artist's, one

ambassador's stunning expression of love for his community. Perhaps if we look closer into our own communities, we will find more gifts of love to celebrate. They may not be as intricate as Mr. Shadi's garden, but they will probably flourish if properly recognized. Maybe it is time to begin to foster a heightened sense of community by recognizing and promoting these gems.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Debbie Byrd, Patsy Eubanks, Randy Hester, and Dorothy Shadi for their contributions to this effort. I would especially like to thank Mr. Shadi, mostly just for being himself.

NOTES

- 1 See Randy Hester, "Labors of Love in the Public Landscape," *Places*, 1, No. 1 (1983), pp. 18–27.
- 2 Deborah Byrd Kilmer, "Tradition Blooms in El Cerrito," *West County Times*, 20 June 1980, p. 1.