Ted Smyth, Garden Designer, Landscape Architect.

Ted Smyth will go down in history as one of New Zealand’s best-known and most unconventional characters of garden design with his own very distinct style. Designing awarding-winning gardens for fifty years, his unique body of work is recognized in countless international books and publications, including the Harvard Design Magazine. In 2017 a monograph entitled The Modern Gardens of Ted Smyth was published by Routledge. Authored by Rod Barnett and Jacqueline Margetts it is the first book solely dedicated to a New Zealand landscape architect.

A generation of garden designers has been influenced by Smyth’s work. Beautiful, crisp, elegant, and instantly recognizable, this style has stood the test of time, continuing to fascinate and move people with its sophistication and clarity of purpose. Ted Smyth’s striking use of plants as sculptural forms, his innovative combinations of stainless steel and neon, and his distinctive technique of visually linking planes of water to seascapes and countryside are characteristics that have been trend-setters both in Aotearoa NZ and throughout the world of modern landscape design. Ted often majored on a palette of NZ native plants.

Edmund (Ted) Owen Smyth was born on Friday 13 May 1937, the oldest child of four, and died age 82 on Friday November 22. He left behind his wife, Ana, nine children and many mokopuna to whom he was both an inspiration and much-loved mentor.

Ted grew up in a West Auckland suburb to a “state house” family who moved house several times during his childhood in the war years, when productive gardening was both a necessity and a joy for Ted, and forged in him a love of plants that he would carry through his life.

By his own admission, Ted was not a particularly academic student, and at Avondale High School he chose to pursue his interest in music and art which led to work as a graphic artist and then as a fine art painter. By the time he was in his late-twenties he was married to his first wife, Shirley Smith, with children on the way, and in the 1960’s, his interest in landscape design and career in garden-making had begun to take root, partly out of the necessity of supporting his family, while still painting at night. The first recorded garden he built was in Point Chevalier, Auckland in 1964 for Jim Davern, working with the architect Allan Warwick.

Ted learned about construction and the way materials work and fit together by building the gardens he designed, this knowledge benefitting his ability to design well. According to Barnett and Margetts (p18, 19), Smyth’s design ability was also influenced by the lessons from his art teacher at school, R.N. ‘Mousy’ Field who taught about composition, colour, line, form and depth, all of which are strong elements in the gardens Smyth went on to create. Smyth himself talks about landscapes that are “structurally sympathetic” to the buildings that they occupy space alongside.

He saw landscape as art and was purposefully original in his work. He avoided studying the work of other designers or seeing others’ gardens in order to become confident in himself, although later in his career he did work with Rod Barnett, Heidi Monks and Margaret Phillips. He preferred to work without a brief from his clients. His design technique was similarly individual, using a small, light “mapping pen” or pencil and pencil sharpener, and finding computer technology abhorrent.

While Smyth is perhaps better known for his stunning private residential gardens, he also deserves recognition for the many community and playground designs he has done, and for his work in the public realm on larger projects later in his career including Quay Park (Mahuhu ki te Rangi) and Basque Park. In this work he was driven by his desire to contribute to the enjoyment of landscape design and gardens as art by more than just the wealthy and elite in society. His interest in poetry as expressed in Maori imagery and symbolism, and his valuing of free play for children, are evident in this work. Most of Smyth’s “adventure playgrounds” were built in the 1970’s when he had young children of his own, and after his marriage to Ana van der Pol who was an early childhood teacher and also had young children. Smyth’s playgrounds used structure and landscape topography to provide opportunities for movement, exploration, imagination and risk-taking in natural settings, all of which are hot-topics in today’s dialogue about play space design. So too is the korero around post-colonial Aotearoa NZ landscape design and how our “bicultural New Zealandness” can be expressed in the shape and form of the spaces we design. Ted was ahead of his time in so many ways.

For Ted, working on Quay Park (Mahuhu ki te Rangi) was a defining experience in terms of a change from designing contemporary, cosmopolitan gardens to conceiving of something “poetical and absolutely NZ”. The challenge for him was to design something using Maori imagery that was acceptable to Maori, and he learned about abstracting from the original in a way that was “referential rather than literal” in order to achieve this. He worked solely on public work for the last 5-6 years of his working life.

Ted was also very supportive of students studying landscape architecture and design, frequently presenting at seminars and lectures to the public and students and leading design studios as part of the landscape architecture program at UNITEC. According to Ted, “I am not a teacher, I am a doer, and though I am proactive with friends and students, academia is not my thing”. That said, many of us as both students and practitioners, including the writer, have benefitted from Ted’s lessons, his encouragement and his mentoring. In 1999 Unitec awarded Ted an honarary degree in landscape architecture in recognition of his acheivements in the field.

To close this citation, nothing expresses Ted’s great attitude and delight in his work better than his own words shared with Rod Barnett and Jacqueline Margetts:

 “*As far as I am concerned I have had bad moments and magnificent moments but it is all business as usual.*

*I am proud of everything that I have done; perhaps proud is not the word I would use, but I would say I have felt both justified and satisfied with my work. I have learned from doing; never a lot from any one job, as learning is a process and if you have any integrity at all that process will continue throughout a lifetime……..a process that does not end.*

*My major breakthrough was Quay Park. This has been designated by Auckland City as one of the city’s works of art. I feel validated in my intent to explore art outside of painting and within landscape.*

*This is what I do and this is what I believe in, although at times this has been difficult. I apply myself to small jobs in the same manner in which I apply myself to big jobs. What has kept me going for 50 years? I am obsessed and I am lucky to be alive still.” Ted Smyth*

We honour Ted for his immense contribution to the profession of garden design in Aotearoa New Zealand. May he rest in peace.

Jill Rice

Chairperson GDSNZ Accreditation Board

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With special thanks to Rod Barnett and Jacqueline Margetts for some of these words and their comprehensive coverage of Ted’s life and work in their book, The Modern Landscapes of Ted Smyth – Landscape Modernism in the Asia-Pacific, published 2017 by Routledge