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TOPICS: Architecture Food Gardens Gardening Organic Sustainable United Nations Urban Farming

photo: Michael Stewart



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By Michael Stewart, Managing Editor

NEW YORK, June 28- In August of last year, UN staffer Arif Khan, Partnership Coordinator for the World Humanitarian Summit, was walking on the 17 acre grounds of the UN Headquarters in New York, when it occurred to him that the open area he was looking at, a combination of grass and a large plot of dirt, could be transformed and transformative, that in this space a practical and meaningful connection could be made between rhetoric, policy and direct action, that this space should become a food garden for the UN Community.

photo: Arif Khan

“I thought, what a great thing it would be to connect people together here, outside and away from their normal day to day interactions and give them an opportunity to grow food together, an opportunity” Khan says, “to be in greater touch with most of the people around the world that still grow their own food.” Furthermore, Khan says he wanted to create a place where “people from different countries could interact with each other around this basic practice”. “Wouldn’t it be incredible ,” he says “to have people, who are usually in complex political debates with each other, share common ground around something simple like this?”

Khan, sort of laughingly, says he has this vision “of Iran, Russia and the United States, in the food garden, arguing over who grows the best tomatoes.” More seriously though, Khan does earnestly believe that by bringing the UN community together around

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the practice of growing and sharing food together, the garden could become a place that nurtures peace as well as plants, fruits and vegetables.

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UN Food Gardens Club members share info with UN community . photo: William Gates

Khan shared his idea with some of his colleagues at the UN, and with that the idea gained vitality. Khan says that among the project's many staunch advocates Ana Jimenez, a staffer for the UN's World Humanitarian Summit, deserves much of the credit for the project's early momentum. Khan and Jimenez quickly ramped up efforts to bring in more members of the UN community, and prepared to discuss the project with decision makers. Khan says "I was a very surprised how quickly people from within the UN community coalesced in support of the idea, approved the use of the space we selected and how it quickly became a living, breathing project."

However, Khan and his group keenly understood that a food garden at the UN headquarters could not simply be a collection of garden rows. The historic, diplomatic, and architectural significance of the site, combined with the over-arching mission imperatives of the UN, all demanded that the design of the garden take all these into consideration in a thoughtful, meaningful and enduring way. So, Khan reached out through social media for help with the design. Architect William Gates, was quick to respond.

Gates works as an architect, teaches design at the New York Institute of Technology, and is also a firefighter with the FDNY. He earned his M. Arch from the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Throughout his

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years of study and practice, he has always sought to incorporate the beauty of nature and the significance of place into his work. An example of this is reflected in his work titled *“To Live with Water”*, a project that earned him first place in the *27th Nisshin Kogyo Architectural Design Competition*.

Gates instantly grasped the important role nature was to have on the project. In fact, he sees this project as so compelling and important that he has so far dedicated countless hundreds of hours into its design; and because this is essentially an unfunded undertaking, he is volunteering his services.

Architect William Gates (fore) with Architect Joseph Messick.

The architect began the UN project by studying the site Arif Khan’s group selected, which is situated to the north of the Secretariat and General Assembly buildings and an adjacent rose garden. Gates enlisted the help of his former university classmates, architects Joseph Messick and Samson Oshunrinde, and one of his former students from Poland, Ela Leja, to help him measure and collect data from the site. Gates extensively photographed the site, drew numerous sketches and took note of the significant architectural objet d’art in its surroundings. He even composed a 3D digital model of the site, complete with a Sun study that examines how sunlight will move across the site throughout the year.

Gates explains why he dedicated so much time to understand the site before diving into its design, “When I first looked at the site, my first thought was ‘What a precious area!’, there’s the UN Headquarters and General Assembly buildings, iconic masterpieces of 20th century architecture, and it’s surrounded by great architecture. To the east across

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the East River you have Louis Kahn's memorial to Franklin Roosevelt and his 1941 speech articulating the Four Freedoms; freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Then to the north, literally just feet away from the site is a monument to Eleanor Roosevelt and her work as a champion of human rights. So taken all together, I quickly realized that the site is precious. I absorbed that as a starting point. I was building on something akin to sacred ground, and I really had to do it right."

Next, Gates began his work on developing the site plan. He experimented with several different concepts. While he showed me a portfolio of his early conceptual drawings, he pointed to a seven bed design, with each bed representing the continents as an abstraction of the concept of the world coming together to grow food, another that had the beds arranged in an interlocking, weaving pattern, and many, many more.

Each drawing expanded on some new insight into the form and function of the garden that was informed by his visits to many of the community gardens run by the city, feedback from Arif Khan and his group, as well as his own intensive study of urban food gardening and its successful exemplars around the world. Concepts regarding pollinator attractors (plants that attract bees and butterflies) as well as bio-diversity beds, and plants and flowers that naturally repel plant eating rodents, and so forth, all started to manifest in his conceptual design work.

For inspiration, Gates taped-up two photographs in his studio, located in the attic of his New York City home. One was a picture of a hand reaching to pick

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a single blueberry, the other was a picture of two dirty hands cupped together holding various freshly picked turnips. “The pictures were so captivating and beautiful, and I would just stare at them again and again and again. And then I realized that the whole idea of this project was about growing and sharing food as an essential human activity. I mean, without that there’s no humanity.” Gates continued, “the project quickly began to take on expanded dimensions beyond that of a simple food garden. It needed to become a real sustainable place, an example of how to live cooperatively with the environment, a place that is not only meaningful for people to go to, but that also speaks to the environmental crisis that we are confronting now.”

Gates inclinations have always been not to view nature as something to be contained, but rather as something that deserves a strong measure of reverence, as well something to be regarded as precious and inspiring. Rather than designing a layout of raised beds that would present themselves as pockets of nature in contained and controlled spaces, he turned the notion on its head and offered a concept of raised beds and lowered walkways that would in his words, “immerse people in a growing environment; that as people enter a space where you are growing something, that they can see and feel that they’re entering a different space, a space of nature.” Arif Khan’s group loved the idea, and for Gates it represented a major breakthrough in the design process.

The result was what he described as a cascade of creative thought. Gates produced drawing after drawing in his pursuit of a perfect design. Interestingly, the inspiration for the final plan would come from a most unexpected source. (More on that later.)

Khan also asked Gates if he could incorporate an arbor, to accommodate the cultivation of grape vines and such, into the design. Gates took the idea a few steps further by incorporating the arbor into a design for a pavilion. The pavilion would offer visitors and gardeners a shady area with benches within which garden tools could be stored. And with that Khan introduced the idea of adding an information kiosk to the pavilion, to communicate all the work the United Nations is doing around the world to promote sustainable land use, small scale and urban farming. According to Gates, “Arif’s idea was brilliant, and presented a wonderful opportunity to show how people can come from all over the world to the United Nations Headquarters and cooperatively grow food together, that if we can do it here in New York City, we can do it anywhere.”

For the pavilion’s design, Gates drew inspiration from renowned architect Louis Kahn. He recalls, “Lou Kahn said ‘the institutions live in the spaces.’ So the institutions of learning lives in the schools, the institutions of healthcare live in the hospitals and so forth. So what’s happening here is that the pavilion has to provide for the utility of the space as well as be a place for the meaningful aspirations of the space to exist with dignity and hope.”

Gates began the design process by acknowledging that the space stands shoulder to shoulder with some of the great architecture of the 20th century and, furthermore, that it has to represent the global character of the community within which it resides. He calculated lines and angles of sight from the pavilion site to the UN Headquarters and General Assembly buildings, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Four

Food Garden Pavilion to the UN buildings, Four Freedoms Park, and Eleanor Roosevelt Monument.

Freedoms Park and the Eleanor Roosevelt Monument, to ensure his design would, as he put it, “give a respectful nod to the great works surrounding it.” For the shape of the pavilion, Gates says, “I looked at a map of the Earth, and began to abstractly sketch out the form of the continents. For me great design starts with the question, ‘what if I do this, what if I do that?’. I don’t know what the answer is but, but it’s a way of moving forward... feeling my way forward in the darkness.” Gates quickly understood that the traditional way the Earth was rendered on world maps, with the Atlantic Ocean in the center, wouldn’t serve well for the open space he needed and the views he wanted to preserve. So Gates cut the map, changed the perspective and placed the wide Pacific at the center. Using the oceans as open space, Gates drew abstractions of the continents into the plan of the design. For the arbor, he arranged to acquire wood from the local boardwalks that were destroyed by hurricane Sandy. Gates says, “I heard that the New York City Parks Department had a warehouse filled with this wood, and I thought ‘what a great way to sustainably repurpose this wood’. So I started thinking about how many member nations belong to the UN, and so for the arbor I choose to use 193

pieces of the wood, each representing a member nation, to vertically support the arbor. So the whole building is an abstraction and model of the Earth and the member nations coming together to build this space.”

Satisfied with the pavilion design, Gates turned his attention back to the layout and design of the garden itself. Gates continued to experiment with a number of concepts, yet the perfect design remained

elusive.

Now, at this point in the story, it's important to know that Gates is the father of 3 young children, two boys and a girl, who often raid his home studio for colored pencils and pens, watercolors, paper and other art supplies. It's a battle Gates has been lovingly losing for years, "I try to tell them, 'please leave daddy's things alone,' but my kids love to draw and paint, my studio is irresistible to them and I totally understand that." So, one day last winter, Gates left his studio, routinely told his kids to "leave daddy's things alone", and departed for a meeting with Khan, Jimenez, Messick, Oshunrinde, and enthusiastic supporters of the project. The pavilion design was unreservedly praised by the group. However, no consensus could be reached on the garden, and Gates himself told the group he hadn't yet uncovered the perfect layout.

Gates returned to his home that evening determined to flush out a design that encompasses everything the garden represents. He entered his studio, and was shocked to discover that his 7 year old son Owen had entered his studio and had drawn on a number of his sketches. A tiny amount of irritation flickered through Gates' mind for a moment until he saw what Owen had drawn. The boy had drawn outlines of his hand. Gates looked at the drawings, and then looked at the pictures he had pinned up... the one showing a hand picking a blueberry, and the other of dirty cupped hands holding freshly picked turnips, and that flicker of ire was replaced by the joy of discovery. Gates says, "It was like someone dumped a bucket of cold water on me. There were the photographs and there was the shape of Owens hand on my last drawing and it hit me. What if I try

laying out the beds in the shape of a human hand facing the UN, as a gesture to the United Nations; as

a way of showing the world ‘look at what we can do together’?” Gates had found what he describes as “the perfect manifestation of where the utility of the food garden meets the meaningful expression of it.”

Gates’ ‘eureka!’ moment fueled innumerable hours of creativity. He created beautiful drawings of the new concept and, fueled with excitement, called Arif Khan and Ana Jimenez and said “I’ve got it figured out. I’ve got the design! Let’s get together!”

The three met for lunch the next day. Gates says “We sat down and I showed them the drawings and I’ll never forget what they said. They were laughing, they loved the idea so much and they said ‘We can’t believe it, we didn’t think you were going to do *such* a good job! This is amazing!’”

With Gates drawings in hand, and permission to use the site, the group presented the project to the broader UN Community, and the UN Food Garden club was born. The club reached out to the New York City Parks Department, and found an eager partner in Nancy Kohn, Executive Director of Green Thumb, the largest community garden program in the United States, who arranged for the club to receive free soil, compost and mulch for the installation. Another key partner is Brooklyn Grange, the world’s largest rooftop soil farm, located in Brooklyn, NY. Brooklyn Grange loaned and donated equipment to the club and offered technical advice regarding irrigation.

However, just as the club was set to break ground on the north lawn, they were informed that they wouldn’t be able to start construction. Adjacent to where the food garden is planned is a temporary 175,000 square foot building, constructed in 2009, to house the Security Council, the U.N. conference organizations, the General Assembly and the

organization's eclectic art collection, while the Headquarters and General Assembly buildings underwent renovations and security upgrades. That work now complete, the temporary building is slated to come down this fall, and the planned garden would impede the demolition.

Nevertheless, Facilities Management Services at the UN, recognizing the amount of work the club had done and how much support the club has garnered from both inside and outside the UN community, worked with the club to find an alternate site for the food garden.

Now known as the "South Garden", the site is nestled next to the Secretariat Building behind a large satellite dish, and is visible from the UN lobby, and the cafeteria.

With equipment, steel raised planting beds purchased with donations, and large piles of donated mulch and soil all already delivered. Gates scrambled to work out a design for the South Garden's smaller allotment of space. He completed another 3-dimensional model and sun study, and laid out the beds according to the best location for each to receive the most sun in the confined area during the growing season.

Both Khan and Gates view the abrupt change in plans as not so much a set-back, but a blessing. The South Garden initially offers the club much greater visibility to the public and UN community, and with that, there has been a significant boost of interest in supporting and working in the garden. Furthermore, once the North Garden is developed, having both garden spaces actually opens up more space for greater participation.

Since the initial plantings a few weeks ago, the garden is already showing signs of bearing fruit, so to speak. Strawberries, tomatoes, eggplant and more, all planted by an international group of Secretariat and mission staff, are being mutually tended to and cared for in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation. A look at the club's Facebook page already reflects an abundance of pride and teamwork in what they've been able to accomplish together in such a short amount of time.

And even though Gates' design for the North Garden won't see completion for perhaps a year or more, he remains very active with the club, planting and caring for the garden, and taking care of occasional issues that crop up. He fully intends to stay active with the UN Food Gardens beyond the eventual completion of his designs.

With so many successful milestones already realized, the UN Food Gardens certainly shows potential for fulfilling Arif Khan's early vision of the gardens as a place that just might nurture not only fruits and vegetables, but a better and more peaceful world as well.

You can follow the UN Food Gardens on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/UNFoodGardens>

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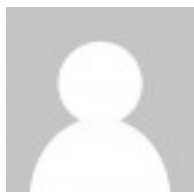
3 COMMENTS

ON "HOW UN STAFFERS, AN ARCHITECT AND A NAUGHTY LITTLE BOY MIGHT JUST SAVE THE WORLD"



Taryn | June 28, 2015 at 8:48 am | Reply

Mike, that was a beautifully written article! I'm looking forward to going down to the garden later this summer or next Spring. Looks like it is going to be pretty amazing 😊



Bano wani | July 2, 2015 at 3:48 pm | Reply

Well written article.love the heading.thanks for your sincere effort.God bless.



Mike Stewart | July 2, 2015 at 9:45
pm | Reply

Thanks so much! It really was a
pleasure to write this piece. I really love
what you guys are doing.

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Making Good: How to Garden Like a Diplomat

What the rooftop garden at the United Nations Headquarters in NYC can teach you about gardening.

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A rooftop garden at the massive UN Headquarters complex in New York City is bringing together UN workers from different countries to produce food and plants, grow friendships and promote sustainability.

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The UN Food Gardens (<http://www.unfoodgardens.org>) is the first-ever food garden on international territory. UN workers volunteer to tend to the garden, which faces the banks of New York City's East River, and to participate in garden activities.

The UN Garden Club worked with Brooklyn Grange (<http://www.brooklyngrangefarm.com>), a rooftop farming and green roofing business that operates the world's largest rooftop soil farms, the NYC Parks GreenThumb program (<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org>) and architect William Gates. Together, they transformed unused land at the 18-acre UN Headquarters into an international community gardening effort. It debuted in 2015.



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Happy Hour

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- 12 Tasty Rum (<http://www.and-remade/fix-it/making-good-un-garden>)
- National Rum (<http://www.and-remade/fix-it/making-good-un-garden>)

"For me it's an extremely important way to show the world how we can take even the smallest patch of earth and show good stewardship of the land and demonstrate sustainability and environmental responsibility and promote biodiversity for the betterment of all," Gates says.

The UN Food Gardens, which is cultivated and maintained by volunteers who work for the UN and members of the community, also may inspire you to create or expand a personal or community garden in your own part of the world.

Gardening can be a place for cross-cultural learning and new relationships

More than 50 members of the international UN staff participate in its unique community workplace garden. Gardening can be a solitary activity, but also a way to socialize. For example, the UN Garden Club hosts after-work events, such as "happy planting hour" in the garden.



Gardener's Supply Co.

Some of the food grown in the garden is used in UN cafeterias, cafes and dining rooms, while visitors sometimes take seedlings home with them. Having the garden also provides a visible way to educate visitors from around the world about gardening and sustainability.

"We feel passionate about connecting policy makers and international representatives through the simple act of growing food. For 10,000 years, people grew most of their own food. In the past 50 years or so, we have lost that connection to the very thing that supports us," Arif Khan, founder of the UN Food Gardens, said when it opened in 2015. "The UN is a unique place and we hope that the gardens serve to connect a wide variety of people through the most basic of activities. No politics here."



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The UN garden effort receives no funding from the UN or any UN agency, but works with people in the community and companies, such as Gardener's Supply Co., which provide resources and materials.



Gardener's Supply Co.

"Gardener's Supply has always said that gardening is good for the spirit. It builds community. It makes the world a better place," says Claudia Marshall, spokeswoman for Gardener's Supply Co., which is based in Burlington, Vermont. "The UN came calling and we said, 'This is fantastic. We've got to do this.'"

Don't be afraid of rooftop and urban gardening

The UN garden seeks to set an example for urban land stewardship in the heart of Manhattan. Before the garden was created, no plants, fruits or nuts were grown on land occupied by the UN in New York.

"We realized that there's so much lawn and so much concrete and so much unused space that could be used so much more sustainably and productively," Catherine Zanev, coordinator for UN Food Gardens Initiatives, said in a press release.



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Khan, a UN staff member, came up with the idea for the garden. Seedlings such as kale, okra, quinoa, peppers, tomatoes, purple basil, purple cauliflower, marigolds and nasturtiums have been transplanted into 10 raised beds designed by Gates. He was inspired by the functionality and look of the garden beds along [The High Line](http://www.travelchannel.com/roam-blog/adventure/get-on-track-with-rails-to-trails) (<http://www.travelchannel.com/roam-blog/adventure/get-on-track-with-rails-to-trails>) in New York City. He used weathered steel, which is durable and would protect the soil from contamination, he says.

The UN garden also has two wildflower beds for pollinators (butterflies, bees and hummingbirds), along with a dogwood tree and [composting products](http://www.gardeners.com/search?q=compost&simplesearch=submit) (<http://www.gardeners.com/search?q=compost&simplesearch=submit>), including a large tumbler, donated by Gardener's Supply Company. The UN catering facilities provide food waste that will be recycled into compost for the garden beds.

"Urban and rooftop gardening is not very difficult at all. You need a little bit of information and a little bit of supplies and boom, you're growing food," Marshall says.

The company, which donates 8 percent of its profits to causes such as sustainability and fighting hunger, also provided [mason bee houses](http://www.gardeners.com/buy/mason-bee-house/37-481.html) (<http://www.gardeners.com/buy/mason-bee-house/37-481.html>).

"They've got mason bees there, which are great pollinators," Marshall says.

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The UN staffers who participate in the garden take a break from their workday to get their hands dirty and see results when plants bloom and produce food.

“They can smell the flowers and smell the soil and see the earthworms and just be a little bit connected to nature...at least as much as is possible in Manhattan,” says Zanev.



Gardener's Supply Co.

UN workers also are using Gardener's Supply Co.'s [GrowEase](http://www.gardeners.com/buy/growease-seed-starting-kit/8589987RS.html) (<http://www.gardeners.com/buy/growease-seed-starting-kit/8589987RS.html>) seed-starting success kits, which come with soil and plant markers, for windowsill gardening, too. Some of the seedlings were transplanted to the raised garden beds outside.

"Many of them had never planted a seed or grown anything. And they're from all over the world. We had a Filipino lady who had never gardened -- another lady from Indonesia; they all were so excited to start a little garden on their windowsill," Zanev says.

The UN has hosted special events, including the Nelson Mandela International Day in July 2015, in the garden.

There's more to come: The garden is the first step in a larger network of gardens planned around the UN Headquarters campus, Gates says.

"(It is) a place where people all over the world can come and grow food together and use that as a central human activity," Gates says.

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