Getting Exploratory at the Conservatory

The Botanical Garden of Smith College is not merely a place to sit down and eat a sandwich while enjoying the pretty flowers around you, nor is it simply a hardcore NASA-esque center for scientific research and data collecting. Instead, this unique staple to the academic persona of Smith combines the values of both artistic aestheticism and scientific understanding into one diverse, beautiful, and memorable place to explore. To me, the most essential characteristic that makes this botanical garden so amazing is its bountiful differences in interior rooms, exterior locals, species, organization, and in so much more. Around every corner is something new and fresh and perhaps even exotic that you’ve never seen before, a fact that quite effectively distracted me from taking notes since I was so deeply involved in exploring the place with my own eyes and (don’t tell anyone) hands. But, looking back at the notes I did manage to take on the Rock Garden and Succulent Room, and drawing upon my readings from class about the history of botanical gardens and the essence of plant science, I believe that Botanical Garden of Smith College is a place of multiple purposes: to teach, to awe, and to preserve. And that it is the multi-purposefulness of this place that makes it so special.

When trying to understand more behind the garden’s active role in striving for these purposes, I had to pay special attention to the organization of the different spaces and couldn’t help but recall Pavord’s own experience of walking through a greenhouse. The garden she observed was very geometrically rigid and precise, “laid out in the classic way: a square, divided
into four smaller squares by two main paths that cross in the center” and in my experience of the Smith garden, I observed something completely different.¹ The exterior spaces like the Rock Garden and Systematics Garden were not forced into squares at all, which immediately made me contrast them to the English style of gardening from the seventeenth century, characterized by “neatness, symmetry, and formal patterns”.² Instead, these unique outdoor (as well as a few indoor) locals felt to me like an embodiment of the later English-dominated style of “natural forms: curves rather than straight lines” because they were intentionally made to look as if they could’ve been plucked right from a jungle or mountainside.

Two particular places that deserve special analysis are the Succulent Room, found indoors, and the Rock Garden, found in the exterior, because they portray many distinguishing features and have purpose behind their organization. The Rock Garden is organized vertically, forcing viewers to look up and down the rocks that surround the path, observing the low growing plants that hug the stones. I believe that the organization of this part of the garden is supremely aesthetic because plants and trees are placed strategically so that the bright little woodland vines and flowers attract your attention to below you and when you turn the corner you come face to face with a tree hanging over you (like the weeping Norway spruce). But it is most definitely not only for beauty, because they are divided into different summit formations: “the outcrop, moraine, and scree.” In other words, formation of various habitats “creates microclimates with varied sun and wind exposures, water retention capabilities, temperature ranges, and winter protection” in order to maximize the survivability of these plants. Therefore, the makers of this Rock Garden had to go into great scientific detail to ensure that the physiology of these plants

¹ Anna Pavord, chaps. XIII and XIV, in The Naming of Names: The Search for Order in the World of
² Keith Thomas, “Cultivation or Wilderness?” Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in

are understood, so that they may be preserved despite a change from their origins in Israel or Japan to their new home in New England.

The Succulent House, although appearing to have no order to it whatsoever, manages to have more organization than meets the eye while still obtaining that wild landscape which Thomas describes as being more favorable than cultivated civilized plots in the eyes of Europeans. The makers of this room decided to follow a biogeographic format that placed American plants on the northern half of the room and plants from Europe, Africa, and Asia on the southern half. The center bed is the main attraction of the room, and plants are divided into biogeographic location by small orange diamonds. There are numerous cacti and other types of exotic looking plants placed on tables along the walls with large informative board hanging on the walls with general information about these desert species. So not only is the scientific knowledge of these plants a main attraction of this room, but there is obvious emphasis on making the visitor feel enveloped in a genuine natural setting. Although completely opposite in the biome spectrum, the Succulent Room is very similar to the Palm House in that they both produce the effect of a natural, uncivilized, atmosphere. My experience in the Palm House was not unlike what Stepan describes as the Western stereotypes of the jungle, as I encountered a “somewhat sinister” atmosphere what with all the “huge, dark palms and tree ferns” looming over me and crowding up my space.\(^3\) So not only are the interior rooms perfect for scientific observation and inquiry because of their controlled elements, but they have also been intricately crafted into a pleasurable viewing experience for visitors, instilling feelings of wonder and getting lost in nature.

\(^3\) Nancy Leys Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature* (Cornell UP, 2001), 11-56 and 240-245
The brochure for the Botanical Garden of Smith College claims that this over 100 year old facility was made to be “of aesthetic as well as scientific value.” It started off as a collection “supporting classical studies of plant schematics and physiology”, before it grew and expanded. Scientists around the country and the world are now using it for research. When plans first started in the late 1800’s there was only the intention of having a botanical garden and some green houses, as time went on, more research orientated attachments were built as well as a few classrooms on education and an outside laboratory. Dunlap traces the evolution from natural history to ecology as being something quite similar to the process at Smith. It was around the end of the 19th century, he writes, that man became increasingly aware of the consequences of their actions on the natural world. It was around this time that the first centers for botanical study were being constructed at the college, following the trend that Dunlap describes as: preservation, research, and education.4 The study of nature ceased to be any man’s hobby, and became ecology, a field exclusively for serious academics like those at Smith. But as time went on, this leaked out into education, not only of the female students but also of the visitors.

In conclusion, the Succulent House and the Rock Garden being my prime areas of reference, the Smith Botanical Gardens are so important to the college because of the fact that they serve so many far reaching purposes: to teach, to preserve, and to, well, show off. This place is more than the sum of its parts; its not just a garden, or just a research facility, or just a preservation site, it’s the embodiment of Smith’s mission to provide a unison between the civilized academic life of the campus and the sense of escape into the beauty of nature found everywhere on campus. Combining the practicality of scientific understanding (not only to keep

species alive but also to disperse plant knowledge to the public) and the pleasure of natural beauty makes this place a staple to The Valley that is more important (ecologically and culturally) than anyone can actually measure.
Emails between Peers:

Dear Mike,

Compelled: Your first sentence has intriguing contrast! This sets up your focus on the differences as the “most essential characteristic.” Wonderment/confusion: I wonder how you will combine a discussion of the “bountiful differences” and the combination of science and art with your conclusion that the garden is a place of teaching, awe, and preservation; your final sentence is the most broad and I wonder which direction you will take overall. Satisfied: You recap nicely on the first paragraph. Underwhelmed: I expected that you would finish with the fact that the purpose of Smith’s botanical garden is to teach, awe, and preserve, and I wonder if you can’t draw anything else from that or from the other possible thesis directions in your first paragraph. You have a very charming and personable style of writing which makes it catchy and fun to read. I was confident from the second sentence that you would address how Smith is able to combine science and art in this “one diverse, beautiful, and memorable place to explore.” I was then intrigued by your focus on the essential aspect of variety. However, your final, possible thesis sentence seems too broad, and indicates a focus mostly on the “awe” and not enough on the specific teaching. I wonder if you can’t make it more specific. It seems as though each of the six authors suggested for support could appear in your body paragraphs. Depending on what you address in the body paragraphs, your conclusion is broad but solid and I’m not sure what suggestions to make in terms of the specificity of your argument, but I hope that you enlighten the reader enough throughout your body paragraphs so that you can make the last paragraph sound less like the end of the first.

From, Annalise

Dear Annalise

It’s a good thing you noticed how I put emphasis on the multi-purposefulness of the place. And yeah I like to keep my intro kinda out there and then focus in as I head towards the conclusion, so I’m not surprised you’re wondering a bit.

For my conclusion, I’m wondering if I didn’t say more than I started with. I feel like with all my evidence in the body paragraphs I actually said more. Hopefully this doesn’t mean that my overall paper was a load of leaves. I will look deeper into the issue.

Thanks for the feedback I appreciate it!
Hope everything works out with your paper
Mike

Dear Mike,
Sorry for the delay in replying. I've had a lot of stuff to deal with this weekend. 

Intro Positive: Engaged. I really enjoy your description of the garden as a whole and then the closer details on the parts relevant to you, especially when you reference yourself and your own emotions (such as it being hard to take notes while distracted by how exotic the room was.) It might not be the most professional, but I personally really like the "(don't tell anyone)" addition that makes the paper feel very personal. Negative: Skeptical. The thesis feels a little weak, being solely the last sentence of the intro with very little buildup to it. Conclusion Positive: Contented. Maybe that's not quite the right word for it, but it has a good "summed up" feel to it. Negative: Uninterested. It might just be because it was right after the introduction which says similar material (so if you had a lot of description in your essay they would form together nicely) but from my point of view here, it just seems like you're saying much of the same as you did in the introduction, but less so. I assume you have more details in the main piece, because claims like the last sentence are pretty bold, but I don't see what you're using to back them up. Something I hope for in your paper is that you really expand on the potential which your thesis in the first paragraph and the statements you make in your last paragraph have, mainly using specific details. Something I hope you avoid is being a little too familiar with the reader, and not backing up your claims as to how and why the Smith Botanical Gardens is all that you claim.

From Zu Zu

Im glad you found the introduction very casual and yet interesting to read, I try to keep that style with me through all departments. With the thesis, i can understand why it seems to not stand on its own, maybe I'm not saying enough with it. Hopefully if I mention a little more of my point earlier and add to what I'm saying in the thesis then it'll be stronger.

As for the conclusion, I would hope that its a good wrapper upper for the paper. But yeah perhaps I get too repetitive and just say what I already said in the intro and haven't really added what I proved in my essay.

Thanks for the feedback, it'll def help me tweak things a bit!

Mike