

The Landscape From the sacred garden to the urban landform

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Abstract: -..The European landscaping arts evolved over a long period of time, reaching the maturity in the late XVIIIth century in England. The full blown of English garden (Stowe, Blenheim) provides an immensely effective space ordering device, able to blend together various components: old and new structures and plantations, existing and proposed roads and paths, water surfaces and art objects of various scales and proportions.

In recent years architects and urban planners witnessed the failure of the conventional ordering tools of the urban design confronted with the increasing complexity of the modern city.

More and more, the landscaping principles became an attractive alternative to the conventional urban design. New concepts emerged like “urban landscaping”, “global landscape”, “landscaped urban form”, etc. New proceedings appeared and were successfully applied, in various projects. We are presenting both the evolution and characteristics of the English landscape design and the successful transfer of these methods into the new urban design in Great Britain.

Key-Words:- English garden, landscape design, urban landscape, landform

From the ancient times the remodeling of the existing territory using vegetation, relief, water and purposefully built structures was a favorite method to ensure the image of power, order and coherence on this earth.

Most of these landscaping exercises of the ancients were earthly prefigurations of the paradise in direct connection with persons considered to be endowed with the power of connecting the words: saints, monarchs, persons from ruling dynasties.

The famous summer gardens of “Zisa” and “Cuba” from Palermo and “Alhambra” in Cordoba, dedicated to the refreshment of the sacred body of the ruler, together with the funerary gardens in the North India (Rajahstan) – dedicated to the memory of saints and monarchs – are a complex mix of geometric and organic living structures expressing the sacred patterns of cosmic organization.

When sir Edwin Lutyens planed the new British imperial capital of India (Raji) at New Delhi, he used geometric patterns inspired by both the sacred Indian tradition (“TajMahal”) and the humanistic European tradition.

The Italian garden of the Renaissance – the first modern form of landscaping art – was not anymore a reflection of paradise but a very sophisticated symbolic and allegorical system of references connected to the difficult path towards the human perfection as inspired by neo-platonic ideas.

The spatial ordering devices, the axis, perspectives,

ramps, water surfaces, pavilions, statues of these gardens are used until today, and they express a new message: the ascension of the human body and spirit from the natural to the higher artistic and spiritual realms.

Only one of these gardens remained unscathed by later interventions (baroque, classicism, romanticism): the famous “Villa Barbarigo Pizzoni Ardemani” in Valsanzibio, near Padova, finished in the late XVIth century.



Fig.1 Valsanzibio, Padova

Two main axes configure the gardens: The “Gran Viale” starting from “Diana’s Pavilion”, crossing the “Fountain of Winds” and climbs uphill intersecting the main

direction which starts with the “Labyrinth”, crosses the “Island of Animals”, “The Meadow of Time” and the “Green Palace”, climbing toward the terrace of the “Fountain of Ecstasy” surrounded by eight symbolic statues.

Contrary to the fixed, immutable oriental garden, the Italian garden enjoys meandering paths, alternate roadways, the free play with natural forms and the personal initiatic and ceremonial exploration.

Less than a century later, the French architects will transform the Italian model towards a new monumentality and spatial control.

The entire Italian landscaping apparatus will be subordinated to one single principle: The Great Axis; every other element as the secondary axis, the thematic and secret areas will remain secondary to the ordering principle manifested through huge expanses of land and ample water mirrors: “Les Grands Canaux”.

The system is expressing the triumph of a single personality: the Minister (Fouquet), the Marshall (Condé) and the King (Louis XIV) as incorporation of a new and powerful entity: The Modern State.

The most expressive garden of this kind is not “Versailles” neither “Vaux” but “Chantilly”, where the monumental axis is perfectly autonomous from the “Chateau”, connecting the hill crowned with the superb statue of the conetable of Montmorency with the huge “Grand Canal” (2.5 km) towards the “Grille d’Honneur” forest.

This way of ordering the space will be used in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries for urban planning and it is still in use today as a powerful tool for spatial control.

The coming of age of the classical landscape comes with the birth of the British Landscaping towards the mid XVIIIth century – the most complex and sophisticated system of spatial and territorial control ever created.

The celebrated gardens of “Stowe” and “Blenheim” are complex transformations of pre existing Italian baroque or French classical, frontalized, axial gardens, celebrating the triumph of powerful aristocratic families.

Two main themes were expressed through the layout of the British landscaped scenery:

- The pre-romantic appreciation of nature as a perfect environment for individual reflection and soul-searching;
- The replacement of the French centrality with a new cult for collective civic values and the individual merit, together with a new sensibility for national history and identity.

The British landscaped garden is a classical place, the “Arcadia” of the Ancient Greeks („Et in Arcadia ego”), dedicated to the cult of men of value, of nature and history. They have very complex layouts and are not easily decipherable, expanded as they are over thousands of acres of mixtures of natural and artificial elements, of

old and new, of various styles and shapes.

The axis is not anymore the unifying principle; it is substituted by a very articulated mixture of paths, direct and indirect views, panoramic points, pictorial overlappings.

Stowe is the laboratory of this model – a huge undertaking which has consumed in three generations the largest fortune in Britain: the Temple’s and Cobham’s.

The actual landscape is the result of successive interventions having transformed a huge axial system centered on the “Grand Canal” into a complex array of thematic areas rotating around a “natural” pond. The thematic areas, separated by natural/artificial undulations of the terrain are displaying humanistic, liberal and pre-romantic topics: “The Greek Valley”, “The Temple of Concordia (Peace)”, “The Liberty Hall”, the famous gallery of stone portraits “British Worthies”, together with numerous arches, statues, pavilions, fountains, etc.

The connecting elements of this puzzle are rather indirect, by “framing”, “tunneling”, “screening”; the use of these proceedings favors the oblique views obtained by advancing along sinuous paths.



Fig. 2 Stowe

The apex is obtained after crossing the “Pond” through the gallery of the “Palladian Bridge”: from the opposite side a panoramic view of the ensemble unites the fragmented experience.

The very culmination of this new art of controlling vast amounts of space is the “Blenheim” park.

The Palace and Garden, realized by Vanbrugh and Henry Wise in the early XVIIIth century as a patriotic homage for the Duke of Malborough, displayed an axial composition completed with a roman viaduct over the river Glynne and a commemorative Column.

After more than twenty years of work, Capability Brawn transformed it all: he dammed the river producing an enormous circular pond, flooded the viaduct, crated islands, meadows, forests and dykes, fragmented the Great Axial composition, undulated the terrain, created numerous oblique views and picturesque framings and

the necessary panoramic views in selected points. Only in the proximity of the Palace, fragments of the French and Italian “parterres” on terraces were conserved and restaured in the 1930’s.



Fig. 3 Blenheim, Oxford

The potential of this unique technique to blend together, into a coherent landscape, a large array of different components was drawn into the attention of the urban planner only in the late XXth century.

The complexity of the contemporary metropolis, the multiple layers, fluxes and constituent elements made easier the acceptance of “landscaping” compositional techniques as part of a new method of “urban landscaping” or even “global landscaping” as a substitute for conventional urban design.

Among the pioneers of this new approach are Martha Schwartz in the USA and Adriaan Geuze Holland. Geuze planned the new district of Amsterdam Docklands (Borneo, Sporenburg) as a massive scale “lanscape”, using water surfaces, bridges, oblique views, “framing” and alternative paths as a successful substitute for traditional urban planning methods.

But the most genuine application of “landscaping” to the urban design is to be found in contemporary Britain, where the innate pragmatism and the capacity to negotiate compromise solutions to conflicting problems allowed a smooth transfer of methods.

The most complex applications are to be found in the “City” of London. The unique complexity of the area, blending historic streets and buildings with high density transport networks together with the massive number of new buildings and projects made impossible any attempt to conventionally coordinate the whole.

Starting with the early 1990’s, when an unified administration of London took shape, a new metropolitan strategy of planning and of spatial and visual control emerged, inspired by the traditional British landscaping.

A network of protected visual axis was established between the main interest points – “The View Protection Framework”. Direct and indirect views, silhouettes,

panoramic views and focal points were established and connected through landscaping methods: “framing”, “elongated views”, “landmarks”.



Fig. 4 Central London Model

Twenty four major landmarks inside the “World Heritage Site –London” together with three more super-landmarks: “St. Pauls”, “Westminster Palace” and “The Tower” are the originating points of an extended system of axis, viewing corridors and alignments.

At the intervention level, the main system generates secondary systems of landmarks and connections, coordinated among them and with the general frame, generating coherent paths and views, just like in the traditionally landscaped gardens.

Among the dozens of projects developed today in Central London, none is so illustrative as the “Broadgate – Liverpool Street Station” and its north and east prolongations together with the coordinated sequence of “Finsbury Circle”, “Coleman Street”, and “Wood Street” developments organized around “Aldermanbury square”. Broadgate is one of the very first “mixed use” areas developed during the late 1980’s, from an existing infrastructure hub, using the “physical planning” method, witch means using a multilayered spatial organization for services and transportation.

Architecturally, the area is organized around a number of clearly defined post-modernist places: „Broadgate Circle”, „Exchange Square”, „Finsbury Avenue square”. These plazas are situated at different levels according to the layers of the immersed service structure, and are endowed with numerous public artworks. The system failed to connect well with the new expansions to the north, east and west.

The well-known architectural firm “Skidmore, Owings&Merill” managed to ensure the new connection heightening the level of “Exchange Square” and creating a new pedestrian pathway crossing the sunken level.

The new “Exchange Square” was imaginatively landscaped and its north-west corner was modeled as a landmark coordinating several controlling axis of view,

targeted towards other existing or proposed landmarks.



Fig. 5 Broadgate & Spitalfields Market, London

The north expansion was made possible by a massive suspended building, opening the way to the newest creation of the firm – the 2001 "Bishopsgate and Broadgate Tower", a twin structure of glass towers united by a skywalk and immersed into a densely planted square; the new building will act as a gate towards the north expansion, and laterally, along a perpendicularly axis along a porticated expansion, will serve as visual connector with the new east development: „Spitalfields Market" (Jestico&Whiles & Julian Harrap).

The contact between the areas is ensured by a green square surrounded by buildings organized in successive retreating steps in order to allow the visual connection with the focusing landmark of the new composition – the famous „Spitalfields Church" build by Nicholas Hawksmoor in the XVIIth century. The church is replicated by a smaller red sculpture in order to better align the viewing line.

The new area is a blend of new and old buildings and public spaces; visual and spatial control is ensured by purely landscaping methods: partial axis, viewing directions, panoramic points, "tunnels", oblique moving paths and views. The efficacy and elegance of the approach is surprising as it is amazing that almost none of the traditional urban design principles were put in practice.

The next expansion starts from the hearth of the "Broadgate" towards the existing "Barbican Center", crossing "Wood Street" – the very center of the "City".

The expansion was made possible by the carefully orchestrated connection of six major urban infill operations, performed by different firms, joined carefully together by a beautifully landscaped path, endowed with landmarks, oblique views, passage points. The apex of the entire system is the complex building "5 Aldermanbury square", the point of inflexion making the entire operation understandable, just like into a XVIIIth century park.

The route starts from „Finsbury Street square" in

Broadgate, crosses the the "Oval Finsbury Circus" and arrives at the strange "Moorhouse building" (Lord Foster). This circular structure, cut elliptically, acts in tandem with another oval shape, across the street – the "One Coleman Street" (Swanke, Haydon, Cornell).



Fig. 6 Moorhouse & One Coleman Street, City of London
The dark oval glass structure, framed in faceted white artificial stone, flexes the path toward a small manicured square, containing an old City Corporation ("Basinghall").

The new structures framing the square are rendered neutral, in order to accentuate the compositional apex: "5 Aldermanbury square" (Eric Parry).

Eric Parry's building is situated into a very crowded and complex site – between "Aldermanbury square" and "Wood Street", surrounded by an historic jailhouse and police station, the "London Wall", the "Christopher Wren Tower", the huge "Gate to Barbican" (Nicholas Grimshaw) and the sophisticated "88 Wood Street" building by Richard Rogers.

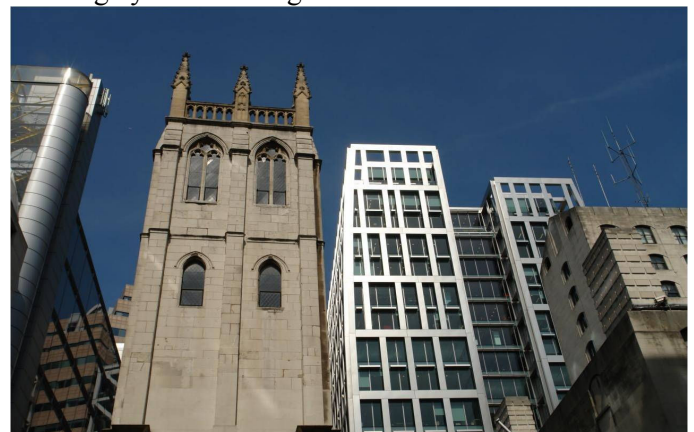


Fig. 7 "5 Aldermanbury Street", City of London

The building manages brilliantly to fulfill its complex tasks: it's high enough (18 floors and a very high groundfloor) to function as a visual landmark, it's twin parallel corpses are elegantly clad in an inox frame at the scale of two levels, in order to offer monumentality and to make it easily identifiable from distance.

The two main elevations are flexed upward like sails, in order to avoid the effect of high vertical facades in a crowded site. The central core is in retreat from lateral elevations allowing a generous amount of light to penetrate the ground floor between the parallel corpses.

The mainly open ground floor has a mineral outlook: natural stone, textured concrete wall and water.

This rather dramatically composed space connects the "Aldermanbury square" to the antechamber of the "Barbican" and allows dramatically framed views toward the surrounding objects: the historical prison, the "Barbican Gate", the "Wren Tower".

Seen from the lower Wood Street the building acts as a discrete but efficient background for the gothic "Wren Tower".



Fig. 8 Barbican, London

Once somebody arrives in the large complex of "Barbican", the important role of "5 Aldermanbury square" becomes obvious. The "Barbican", a masterpiece of the sixties, built as a succession of overlapping layers containing gardens and water basins, floating over the "London Wall" and other ancient structures, has been cleaned from parasitic structures and discretely reshaped a few years ago by the firm Alford, Hall, Monaghan, Morris. From its various upper layers, one sees the elegant silhouette of "5 Aldermanbury square" floating freely over the existing context. Its inflexion targets the view towards "One Coleman street" and inevitably towards the "Moorgate", offering, like in the gardens of Stowe, a panoramic view summarizing the paths woven into the dense tissue of the City.

The effectiveness of using landscaped sites in order to solve complex problems of urban integration is used even in less congested sites, as illustrated by the "land-art" intervention realized by Charles Jenks in 2002 at the "Dean Hill", into the proximity of "Dean Village" in north-west Edinburgh.

This operation was destined to visually relate two monumental neo-classical buildings from the early XIXth century (an orphanage and a boy's school), situated atop the hill but with no visual interconnexion between them. It also served to create an opening for a new pedestrian route along the "Leith Canal" towards the city centre.

Planted between the two buildings, Jenk's installation baptized "landform" is a very condensed elliptical landscape complete with ramps, water mirrors, serpentines and viewing axis, allowing the controlled sequential perception of the two buildings, of the sculpture park, of the picturesque "Dean Village", of the river Leith' meadow.

It is the art of condensed landscaping, but losing none of its complexities.

It was a largely acclaimed intervention and was widely imitated – most recently at the "Giardini delle Vergine" at the "Arsenale" site in Venice.

Using a now familiar system of carefully selected landmarks and oblique views, the installation points toward the lawn in front of the "Dean Building", where a new "land-art" installation points toward an existing funerary monument which marks the starting of the path crossing the Leith park. The path doubles the river as it flows between "natural" forests, new residential districts, old mills converted to contemporary use; at a certain moment the path climbs a system of ramps, deftly cut into the historic tissue and arrives atop the imposing "Dean Bridge" a monumental cast-iron viaduct from the Victorian era. From the viaduct the recapitulative panorama opens to the eyes: Dean Hill, the pavilions, the river, the medieval tissue, the ramps.



Fig. 9 Jenks, Dean Park, Edinburgh

Turning leftward one identifies quickly the landmarks of central Edinburgh.

Before the monumental “landscaping”, there was a more modest and domestic practice: the traditional gardening, situated inbetween the vegetable garden and the bordered lawn, in short the “home garden”.

Reborn in the early 1900ties, the insular gardening is thriving and serves as a model for similar activities everywhere.

As a conclusion to our evaluation, we will look at the interesting urban effects of the “gardening”.

Across the river from the “Palace of Westminster”, over the Thames sits the borough of Lambeth. The gateway to the borough, the Lambeth Bridge is one of the most crowded thoroughfares in London but in the same time one of the most spectacular.

It allows magnificent views towards the Parliament, the Thames, the “Lambeth Palace” (the London Residence of the Cantembury archbishop) and its huge park.

Near the “rond-point” at the bridge’s head, there is the old “St. Mary Lambeth” church with its two cemeteries: the medieval and the Elizabethan. The church is surrounded by nondescript modern buildings.

In the late 1990’s the Lambeth City Hall, asked the Eric Parry (author of the “5 Aldermanbury square”) to remodel the gyration at the head of Lambeth bridge as a “tactical landscape” - a natural/artificial landscape able to underscore the complex relationships between the heterogeneous elements of the site.

The architect performed well, producing a carefully undulated mineral landscape, planted with a few aggressively planted pine-trees; by “framing”, “scaling” and “pointing” they managed to connect the visual elements of the site. The project is known as “A gateway to Lambeth”.

Several years later some voluntary activists from the neighborhood together with a foundation, solicited the right to remodel the ruins of “St. Mary Lambeth” and the

two cemeteries: the external (medieval) and the internal (Elizabethan).

The exterior cemetery, very close to the “Gateway” was transformed into a very traditional “village green”; the interior one was converted into an elaborate remake of an Elizabethan garden.



Fig. 10 Elizabethan garden, St. Mary Lambeth, London

In 2007 the firm “Dow Jones” won the competition for the transformation of the Church into the “Garden Museum”.

Using scarce means, especially wooden elements, the architect were able to create an attractive inner landscape inside the church able to support various activities: exhibitions, seminars, vegetarian restaurant, shop, community, spaces.

Once the Museum was inaugurated (2008) the entire layout: “Village Green”, “Museum”, “Elizabethan Garden” were open to the public and became one of the most loved spots of London.

The people prefer to go around the elegantly abstract “Gateway” instead of crossing it, in order to reach the “Village Green”, the “Church” or the “Elizabethan Garden”.

In the very hearth of London, World City and iconic Metropolis, people gather to enjoy the simplest and the most traditional form of landscaping: a traditional garden.

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