

Formal Characteristics of the Informal Garden

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The title of this contribution to the landscape garden conference may seem to be a game of words and a joke, but the intention is serious.

The romantic garden or the English landscape garden is also referred to as the informal garden. The three designations give separately one part of the characterization of this kind of garden. The romantic informs the spirit and the intention, the English tells you about the geographic origin and finally, the informal tells you something about the shape.

Many attempts have been made to explain the philosophic, the sociological and the political background of the landscape garden. I will limit myself by posing the question, whether the planners of the landscape gardens worked-consciously or unconsciously-according to some rules that could be described or shown as simple space models. The method will be the study of reality as it is recorded in plans and is met with in the gardens, not the literary documents.

About formal, geometrical and architectural.

It may seem absurd to look for formal patterns in a garden art which is described as informal and it would be so, if words could be trusted. However the designation informal garden is of course to be seen in relation to the

situation form which it was created. The informal garden came as a reaction to the geometrical garden of the baroque where form was regarded as a compulsion. Anti-form was therefore intended, but then, the substance cannot exist without form and any created thing necessarily gets form. Therefore "the informal garden" means "the garden which is not geometrically precise in its shape". Therefore the formal principles are not less important, only more difficult to describe.

This goes without saying, since the geometrical forms are just those forms that can be described precisely.

The forms, which in this connexion interest me, are those that give the spatial structure, those that serve as floor and walls in the gardens, those that settle whether a part of a garden is open or closed, narrow or wide, long or broad, high or low and how such separately perceivable parts relate to one another in a garden.

Since the spatial structure is the essence of architecture, the subject that this lecture deals with, could also be named *the architecture of the landscape garden*.

To this a parenthesis must be added about the relation between the architecture and the picture in garden art. Here is referred to the relation between those impressions you get by moving around

in a garden and those you get by contemplating a garden or a part of a garden from a certain point in a precise direction. If you use the words stage and scenery instead of architecture and picture it, what I mean may be more evident. The stage is the place where you act, are in action, it is a space, laid out and equipped for people, who do something. The scenery is a static picture, which in itself represents the meaning or possibly forms the background for the activity. Both the formal and the landscape garden work as well with the stage (the architecture) as with the scenery (the picture), but it is evident that the landscape garden especially makes use of the scenery. Besides you can notice that the landscape garden recruited its skilled workers from the ranks of the painters, while formal garden art had been a matter for architects and gardeners. The interest in the scenery, the picture, the beautiful sight, could have been so dominant that the architecture of the garden was neglected. It may be suspected, that those landscape gardens which became dilettantish in a negative sense of the word, were just missing the spatial structure that makes the garden of practical use and possible to maintain. Piper is the example of a garden artist who, starting from the architect, knew how to work with the picture and gave it the right place in the spatial structure. **The expanse and the lines, the fix-points and the landscape.**

The landscape garden is most often described in relation to garden art of baroque and as a contrast. The comparisons are often influenced by personal opinions to the benefit of one or the other kind of garden, not unusually connected with ethic evaluations. This leads to lack of objectivity, that I will

try to avoid. I would like to see the landscape garden as an independent phenomenon and describe it from its own conditions. I would like to say however, the architecture of the landscape garden is most easily understood if it is seen in relation to the so-called formal garden and is described in the same terms.

The European garden of the Middle Ages appears as a fenced place, a space of moderate size with dense walls or palisades on all sides. The expanse can be organized in different ways, for cultivation or living, and the garden's relation to the surroundings is loose or at any rate of secondary importance. This garden is resting in itself. C.Th. Sorensen mentions it as the "Garten an sich". As architectural structure it can be reduced into one room, an expanse surrounded by walls. At the transition to the Renaissance we find such enclosures added to unities still resting in themselves.

The garden image of the Renaissance is a closed well-bounded ground with a precise, most often symmetrical space organization. To the expanse and the walls are now added fix-points in the shape of sculptures, summer-houses and fountains. The main building can be placed outside, but is gradually brought into the composition, playing the part as the most important fix-point. The parts of the garden are each of them symmetrically shaped and are typically arranged to form an entire symmetrical composition. The symmetry-axis gradually appears as an important linear element, added to the well known structural elements: the expanse, the walls and the fix-points. The landscape designer has got a wider register to play with.

The garden is, however, constantly resting in itself although there are now

opened views into the landscape. This is, however, constantly regarded as something basically different from the garden.

The garden of the Middle Ages can schematically be shown as an expanse encircled by an unbroken demarcating line. The outline of the Renaissance garden is a symmetrical divided expanse with fix-points along the symmetry-axis and with an opening in the demarcating line, that presents a view out into the landscape.

It is customary to place the dividing-line in the history of European garden art between baroque and romanticism. One must, however, also determine the transition from the renaissance to the baroque by the change in the relations to the landscape. While the Renaissance gardens are always clearly demarcated in relation to the landscape, even if they open to extensive views, the baroque gardens are to be seen as landscapes under an artistic will, the aim of which is the illusion that this created landscape continues outside the sight limits in all directions. "Il ne pouvait souffrir les vues bornées" is a statement connected to le Nostre. It is not only an expression of his demand for dimensions, but also, and more interesting, an architecture-philosophic manifesto: the garden should seem infinite by giving the impression of being a smaller part of the totality which in every respect was a garden. You should imagine that the world could spread from the fix-point, that dominated the main axis of the visible garden.

The schematic outline of the baroque garden has the fix-point as the dominating element from which an axial or radiating structure spreads widely over an expanse not clearly demarcated.

The architectural intentions of the landscape garden.

Now we come to the landscape garden. How is this garden as to expanses, walls, fix-points, axes and the relation to the landscape?

It is banal to note that the landscape garden tries to avoid geometric forms and that the spatial structure is not axially built up. There is, however, a rhythmical alternation between open and closed spaces and the number of fix-points has grown. The relation to the landscape is important like in the gardens of the baroque: you go in for the illusion of the endless extension. The decisive difference involves the fix-point. In the gardens of the baroque the organized landscape radiates from one dominant fix-point; in the landscape garden you try to give the illusion that the fix-points are casually placed in a casual sector of an endless landscape.

Thus the spatial structure of the landscape garden must give the illusion of being boundless and casual. The first is obtained by the curved course. The space disappears behind a rideau of trees or a mountain - a set piece in the scenery - and you cannot see how or how far it continues. The casual effect is obtained partly through the placing of fix-points and partly through the use of linear courses. In the baroque gardens the line is used either to show the depth of the perspective or to emphasize the spatial demarcations of the set pieces. The walking lines are typically placed in the symmetry-axes or at the foot of high hedges or edges of a wood by the sides of the open expanses. You therefore get your sensations along those lines that give the spatial structure. But in the landscape garden the walking lines have an independent

course in relation to the spatial structure; you walk transversely to the pattern of space and therefore experience it as if you happened to be a visitor in a strange world. And this was exactly the purpose. The connoisseurs of the landscape garden used gravel walks as necessary remedies for enjoyment and abstracted from them.

Now, if you could consider the problem as solved when you had created the illusion of an endless and casual landscape, then the task will be simple. But the landscape garden, just like all other architecture and art, definitely demands the quality of identity - the unique character of the entirety and of its components. After all it is quite simple: from any work of art you demand that it should be distinguishable from another and it must be possible to familiarize oneself with any physical structure. These claims do not agree with the claims of boundlessness and fortuity - they are in reality diametrically opposite and to unite them in one composition make great demands on the artist.

Then, with which methods did the landscape gardeners solve this delicate problem? To answer the question we shall look at some examples of what is ranked as eminent landscape gardens. I choose Stourhead in England, Liselund in Denmark and Haga in Sweden. Here must parenthetically be inserted that the problem was not always solved. There exist, you know, poor gardens just like poor paintings and bad novels. **Stourhead, Liselund and Haga analysed as spatial structures.**

You can visit Stourhead without discovering that there is a manor house. It has succeeded so well to create the illusion of an Arcadia which rests in its own timeless dream and at the same time spread boundless in all directions.

Nevertheless the garden has its own identity also independent of many temples and other buildings rich in associations. It partly depends on a well considered *genius loci*, the treatment of the scenic conditions of the ground, but rather more on the clear and efficiently varied principles of composition.

As soon as you arrive you notice the large open landscape, the glade in the wood with the lake as the dominant element. Besides, it is characteristic, that you regard the glade as the ground itself; the wood only serves as wall and demarcation, one of the conditions of the garden. This clear structure would, however, be an obstacle to the desired atmosphere if it did not allow doubt. But this it does, by the irregular form of the lake and by the irregular relation made between the wood and the shore of the lake, so that the actual dimension of the lake cannot be regarded in one glance, and the wood, thanks to the irregular edge, gives hope of many other adjoining glades.

Piper's studies from 1779 show how the garden can be regarded as a series of sceneries, each of them characterized and defined as to its atmosphere by buildings. But Piper's plan also shows how all these "pictures" are kept together by a single path that goes around the lake.

When simplified, the plan of Stourhead can be designed with three lines that form irregular, concentric rings; one for the waters edge, one for the path and one for the fringe of the wood. But the architectural meaning of these lines is very different. The content of the line representing the fringe of the wood is three-dimensional. It emphasizes the wall of the landscape space. The line of the lake has a weak plastic effect, yet this effect is still very strong

as the water is such a strong element, both through the horizontal expanse and through the very substance of the water. Finally, the line of the path has no effect in itself. It is line of experience, the practical arrangement for the accessibility of this Arcadia. Furthermore it is the means by which the experience is tied to time as it determines the sequence in which you pass the sceneries.

It is characteristic that none of these lines are lines of sight or repeating lines of sight. You could get the impression that the line of sight did not exist in the landscape garden, but it does. Piper has even drawn them. They combine the building-components in all directions over the lake.

You can wonder at the meaning of this system. Does this not reduce the moment of surprise? Wouldn't it be enough that you could enjoy the special arrangements, such as grottos, temples etc. one at a time from the path during the wandering? Evidently not, and the meaning must be partly that you should feel like walking on and partly that every arrangement, beyond its own attraction, also is the point from where you shall enjoy the sight of another. The system means that you do not only fix the order of experience through the course of the path. It also emphasizes the observation - points, those places from where the sceneries look their very best, the places where you ought to stop and enjoy "a picture", a picturesque view.

Thus, to the three concentric wave-lines should also be added a number of points mainly united with the line representing the path. These points shall be different, but none of them may dominate the others in dimension or importance. The sheet of water has very ef-

fectively taken over the principal part from the predominant point of the baroque. And that is a matter of genius, the intention taken into consideration.

Seen in this way Stourhead appears as a very firm architectural composition. Liselund is one of the first landscape gardens in Denmark and even the most consistently and artistically accomplished landscape gardens in Denmark. It is especially remarkable as it primarily is garden and does not contain any proper main building, only a place for staying overnight, and furthermore because the garden in spite of all international impulses appears as a synthesis of Danish landscape, culture and mentality.

Architecturally Liselund can be seen as a development of Stourhead's composition model. There is the glade in the wood as the dominating space, obtained by the planting of trees which the planners carried into effect several years before the buildings were created. There are the many pavilions, mainly spread along the edges of the wood and in most cases mutually combined with lines of sight.

Here is water too, even several lakes, but used in the plan in quite another way than at Stourhead. At Liselund the water is a brook, the spring of which is dimly seen in the dense nightingale shrubberies. It proceeds in rhythmical jumps with sparkling water, glossy sheets of water and hidden underground passages until the final meeting with the sea.

The combination of the static resting glade and the course of the brook is very efficient and must be seen as the key to an understanding of the architecture of the place and to its special grace.

At Liselund the system of paths is not as clear as at Stourhead. Most im-

portantly, the main path goes parallel to the stream of water. That means that the line of experience and the line of structure, in the main, are the same. You recall the wanderer in Wilhelm Müller's *Die schöne Müllerin*, so well known on account of the music by Schubert. He walks on a path which goes along a brook and the brook becomes the symbol for the course of life and the history of love, with alternations between hope and doubt. At the same time it is the simple skeleton in the story, combining the time and the place. The linear course at Liselund has a corresponding combination of practical and symbolic structure - as you follow the path through the ground you meet pictures rich in sentiments and associations: stations as on a *via dolorosa*.

Moving from Stourhead to Liselund and further on to the park of Haga in Stockholm entails an increasing degree of architectural complexity. In all of the three cases there is embodied in the expanses, the spatial demarcation, the fix-points and the linear course, but while the boundlessness at Stourhead and Liselund is experienced from inside as an illusion obtained through a clever disposition of the demarcating wood-plantings (in the same way as Katsura and other Japanese grounds from the Momoyama period) then Hagaparken interacts with the environs in a more free way. The character of park in the landscape of Brunnsviken is gradually condensed to the very ground, and is there dissolved in a rhythmical play between the wooded hills and the grass-grown hollows.

This composition-form has been possible thanks to the sheet of water of Brunnsviken, which serves as illusionistic centre. You should feel that you

stay in the meadows near a lake that is connected with the sea, which is a part of the same water, which is one of the nature's fundamental elements. It unites all countries and parts of the world and justifies as well Italian temples as Chinese tea-houses and Turkish pavilions.

Maybe these houses came sailing during night in the thin air of *The Magic Flute* and were stranded here at Brunnsviken. Like in a stage scenery by Schinkel, exactly for Mozart's opera, which better than many explanations expresses the escapist spirit of the time.

The making use of Brunnsviken - "the borrowed landscape" of the Japanese - did not release Piper from giving a structure to the mere garden area. He took it out of the topography of the area by organizing the contrast between the convex forms, and the concave forms, the hills and the hollows of the landscape. He kept the hills wooded or planted them, so that they formed dense massifs, and the hollows he formed into bowl-shaped lawns with sloping banks down to Brunnsviken's sheet of water. By this he created demarcated rooms which have the fundamental form of the niche and the antique theatre, at the same time as they are combined with one another with the aid of the paths, the buildings and the massifs. In its rhythmical change between open and closed forms, the composition comes to look like a relief by Jean Arp. But the dimensions and the materials are different from that of the sculpture. In Hagaparken you must move around and enjoy with all senses. Piper must have regarded the foot path as a means of this experience and worked consciously with it so that it does not only lead round between the sceneries and gives a planned experience in time, but

also comes to give a maximum experience of the topographic spatiality. In this respect Hagaparken is related to Rousham, where Kent on certain stretches let the paths connect precisely to the forms of the landscape and also let them take part in involving the borrowed landscape" in the composition.

The architectural image

As many may have noticed, it is far more difficult to give graphic models for the art of landscape garden than to give generally descriptive lines such as for instance Hirschfeldt does. It is clearly seen in garden literature. While the garden art of the baroque could be communicated as simple, easily understood plans, the ideas of the landscape garden were spread through extensive descriptions, and details of designs.

The difficulty in defining the landscape garden as form depends of course on the demands on the illusions of endlessness and fortuity, but also on a practical necessity: the main form of the plan must every time be taken out of the available circumstances. This necessity goes back to economy - it is cheaper to make a lake in a hollow than on a hill - but also to philosophy, which presented the demand for adaptation to nature. These two intentions meet in the interest in the genius loci. Here economy and philosophy were plaited together in the most beautiful way.

The task of the garden artist was how to create an "architectural image" from the topography of the place so that the "architectural image" summarizes the architectural structure in one spatial grasp, which has the character of an image and bears an essential part of the identity of the ground.

The architectural image depends much on the scenic conditions. You can certainly demand it to be there, but you

cannot do anything about the concrete form.

This is the reason that the landscape garden art makes the job difficult for the designer and here is the reason why the well-intentioned publications gave so many poor accounts of the practical work. The landscape garden art should be looked after by artists of Piper's calibre to be fully successful.

If I, from these considerations, should make a general characterization of the development of the informal garden, I will do it this way:

1. The starting point for the architecture of the informal garden is *the expanse*.
2. The expanse has a spatial demarcation, but this must be of such a nature that it can give the illusion of endlessness.
3. The expanse must be "fixed". That is to say defined statically in the dynamics of the illusion of the endlessness.
4. The linear courses must, besides the rest of their tasks, contribute to maintaining "an architectural image".
5. The architectural image must be taken from the topography of the place. Therefore it will always -if the conditions are properly utilized - be exclusive and rich of identity.