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HISTORIC GARDENS IN SWITZERLAND

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Below is an account of the problems we have met with since the setting-up of a working party on historic gardens at the 1972 General Meeting of the Swiss National Committee.

In Switzerland - as in most other countries - there has been no overall study of the history and development of historic gardens, nor, with a few exceptions, do we possess monographs on the most important individual gardens. We even have no general picture of the gardens still in existence, such as an inventory could provide. In writings on the masterpieces of Swiss art and in miscellaneous works on monuments, historic gardens are very often no more than mentioned in passing, as though they did not belong to a special branch of art. Thus no real mention of historic gardens is found elsewhere than in local periodicals or an occasional book. Similarly, studies on the gardens of individual cantons are rare; they exist only for Bâle and Solothurn, unless we are to include the gardens at Winterthur, which are more recent.

The aim of the working party at the outset was thus to encourage research on the subject. Its work was mainly to take effect through the famous series entitled "Monuments d'art et d'histoire de la Suisse", in which certain of the biggest gardens had already been mentioned and studied.

It should also be noted that, as Switzerland had no princely courts, it is logical that she should possess no very large gardens. Nevertheless there are many gardens once belonging to the nobility and dating from the 17th century onwards, which vary in aspect and development from one area to another. At the present moment in Switzerland we are studying a category of garden which is of great importance for our country, namely, the peasant garden. Up till very recent times this type of garden continued to undergo a surprising degree of development, while yet remaining true to the very ancient traditions

of the early days of our civilisation and close, for example - as other gardens were not - to the cloister layout. Professor A. HAUSER, of the Advanced Federal Technical School of Zurich, is at present studying the peasant gardens of Switzerland as a whole, and will very shortly be in a position to present a survey of the gardens in this category.

The working party has set itself the task of making a detailed inventory of all the historic gardens of Switzerland. This should include gardens of all categories, whatever their importance, including those of the 20th century. This inventory, based on the ICOMOS inventory of historic gardens (1971), will also include small gardens and public parks. Up to now, nine Swiss cantons have been covered, and have thus submitted an inventory of their gardens. In many others inventoring is in progress and will, we hope, be shortly completed. Work has been delayed owing to the fact that the persons in charge of monuments in the various cantons have been overburdened with other tasks, mainly in connection with European Architectural Heritage Year.

Once the inventory of gardens has been completed it will be available to those in charge of the monuments in each canton, the authors working on "Monuments d'art et d'histoire de la Suisse" and research-workers studying historic Swiss gardens. The local inventories so far completed show that the gardens worth preserving are relatively few in number but are, effectively, in danger of disappearing with the passing of time. A great many gardens are ceasing to exist at the present time, not merely for financial reasons but in some cases because they are being sacrificed to make room for roads or blocks of flats. Nevertheless the population is seriously in need of open spaces, particularly in the big towns where they are required for purposes of relaxation. Hence the creation of new gardens and the renovation of ancient ones corresponds to a deep-seated public need. It is for this reason that, once it is in possession of more complete data, the ICOMOS Swiss Committee's working party will be making known its findings to the public so as to bring home the importance of the country's historic gardens.

Owing to the diversity of the regions and to the country's language divisions, the picture which emerges from a study of its historic gardens is a rather heterogeneous one, as is that which has already been seen to emerge from books on the history of Swiss art. Since Switzerland did not possess any one main artistic centre, Swiss garden design has always been marked by the influence of foreign examples, which have been adapted to suit the country's requirements. All Swiss gardens derive their characteristics from Italian,

French, German or Dutch models, the influence of which they reflect to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, for example, the gardens of the wealthy burghers - almost all of which have now disappeared - were very like the Dutch gardens of the Renaissance. In these, the decorative features are parterres with carved box-hedge motifs and low-growing flowers, and they were to be found again in the principal peasant gardens of Switzerland. But unfortunately, these are the gardens which have most suffered from so-called "modernization", and their owners have replaced the parterres by plain lawns.

In general, it should be the task of the persons in charge of the preservation of monuments to take better care of the gardens surrounding historic buildings; a large number of the gardens of the big old houses are in a state of neglect and need restoring, and many gardens have aged because their plants and trees are dying. This is where a competent landscape architect should intervene and restore the historic garden to its original condition, in cooperation with whoever is in charge of the building it contains. Progress in this direction has already been achieved in a number of places : thus, for example, two cloister gardens have been restored from ancient engravings, and a number of informal-landscape gardens mutilated by the building of new roads have been given new trees in order, as far as possible, to fence them in once more. At Winterthur, which possesses a large number of gardens dating from the beginning of this century, different organizations have been set up for the purpose of preventing these from being built on.

The efforts being made in Switzerland to preserve open spaces are primarily directed towards town parks dating only from the 19th century which are threatened with "modernization" for practical ends. However, if they are successfully renovated with the aid of cooperation between the various authorities concerned, their preservation need not necessarily rule out the satisfaction of practical needs.

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