



Foreword

Sébastien Marot

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Clemens Steenbergen
Wouter Reh

Architecture and Landscape

The Design Experiment
of the Great European Gardens and Landscapes

Revised and expanded edition

Birkhäuser

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9

In scarcely twenty years time landscape has gone from being a relatively insignificant, even neglected topic into one of the major commonplaces in the architectonic and urban planning debate. In the process, a whole procession of new concepts (from 'garden' to 'territory') have penetrated, as in a Trojan horse, into the schools, institutes and academies where this debate is being carried on. At the same time, in many European countries a thorough re-evaluation of landscape design has occurred. As a result of these developments, landscape architects have wormed their way into a position nearly equal to that of architects and urban planners – thereby rekindling the discussion among those more established professions.

Out of laziness or self-interest some might want to insist that this is only a fad or an amusing flash in the pan, a phenomenon of marginal theoretical importance, without lasting effects on the ideas of physical planning. And perhaps there is something to that. As a matter of fact, when the schools of architecture have taken over landscape jargon, it is often almost reluctantly, as if trailing behind a society which, because of all kinds of social, political and economic mutations, is absolutely forced to approach its environments (their management, programming and planning) in a different way. But that these changes perhaps will have consequences for the disciplines of spatial design – and thus require a radical reorientation or reorganisation of the departments where these disciplines are taught – well, it would appear that almost no one in these programmes is concerned about that. The strategies of educational readjustment or diversification inspired by landscape theory – if things should come to that, and they do occur in a modest (or worse yet, noisy) way – are often very superficial. As it happens, it is easier to announce that one is going to include 'the territory' or the so-called 'landscape question' in the programme, than it is to seriously survey the ramifications of this

question in the various spatial design disciplines and take up the challenge to thoroughgoing self-examination.

Regrounding landscape design

There are, however, exceptions. Thanks to initiatives from several more or less isolated researchers and lecturers, some universities have begun to seriously tackle this work, which involves both retrospection and experimentation. The most notable of these exceptions is undoubtedly the Technical University at Delft. There, in the circle around the writers of this book, an experimental garden for theoretical investigation in landscape architecture has been created, which can rightly be considered as one of the most active and most tenacious that has ever been generated by a school of architecture and urban planning – not to mention programmes in landscape architecture. *Architecture and Landscape*, the first English edition of which appeared in 1996, only lifted the corner of the curtain on an impressive amount of research, studies and publications in which numerous lecturers, scholars and students have been involved since the late 1970s. This research can be both historical in nature or oriented toward the future; it can involve the tradition of the walled garden or the city park, or focus on the analysis of contemporary territorial infrastructure, or else experiment with yet unseen combinations of programmes and design instruments at the intersection of architecture, urban planning and landscape. The common objective in all these investigations is nothing less than the rediscovery of the foundations, idiom and visual grammar of landscape architecture.¹ By investigating the past in this way, the writers clearly want to contribute to the 'renaissance' and liberation of a discipline.

This enterprise can in certain respects be compared with that of the progressive architects, who beginning in the 16th

century on the one hand surveyed and described the architectural monuments preserved from Greek and Roman antiquity, and on the other devoted themselves to the engraving of ground plans, elevations and bird-eye views of the most notable residences built by their contemporaries. Just as in that time, relaying the foundation of a discipline today requires building up a data bank by means of inventurisation and cataloguing so that comparison and assessment are made possible. The research laboratory at Delft has chosen to first concentrate its efforts on on-the-spot rediscovery of famous examples of gardens and landscape designs by investigating them with the means and instruments of design such as maps, measurements, ground plans, perspective views, but also axonometrics, dissection into layers, and all the other procedures of deconstruction or sequential analysis that are presently possible thanks to digital technology. All this work invested in the representation and in the new analytical drawings that have been thus produced is important not only for the discoveries that can arise from it, or the new hypotheses that one can formulate about each of these creations, but moreover because they are a tremendous instrument for 'situating' the landscape architectural design and penetrate the logic of its specific achievements. It is here that the great strength and originality of the Delft research laboratory's contribution to the historiography and theory of garden planning unquestionably lies.

The garden as representation of the landscape in situ

A quick glance through the literature is enough to note that even the historians, however learned and fascinating their works may be, have never attempted working out a to some degree systematic graphic and exemplary analysis of parks and gardens. Leaving aside rare, very specific monographs, in the literature one finds almost nothing other than reproductions and interpretations of already existing material (ground plans, engravings, bird's-eye views, 'vues cavalières'², sketches and paintings of all sorts, historic photographs, etc.). Beyond the fact that their documentary value is sometimes highly dubious (and left unquestioned), these 'ready-made' representations, instead of a vehicle, very often become mirages, obstacles or screens set between the observer (or even the visitor) and its object. In these studies, the reproduction of what is there is at its best photographic, and one rarely gets beyond the delineation of a few plans or basic sketches (often on the basis of this already existing material) in order to illuminate certain aspects or facilitate comparison. One can conclude that the analyses, characterisations and interpretations which traditional art history offers us (whether these are monumental or structuralist) almost never set about fashioning their

own representational devices in order to confront, explore and reveal what their objects (gardens, parks) precisely are, namely constructed representations. Nor is that often the subject or purpose of such studies. Rather, their intention is either to investigate the cultural context – that is to say, the ideological, technical and aesthetic background – on the basis of which these landscape architectonic creations can be interpreted; or to wander in the ambiguous interface between the place and its representations, and in the enthralling choreography or conspiracy of the arts (painting, sculpture, poetry, etc.) for which gardens have so often been the stage. But this is precisely where the problem arises. In the historiography of gardens, one can all too easily let oneself be led along by sources of documentation from related (and contributory) arts, with which art historians are normally more familiar, such as literature, engravings, painting and sculpture, etc. Therefore this historiography tends to be very 'iconographic' in nature and to focus primarily on the philosophical thought, the symbolism in the settings, and other sorts of discourses for which the garden only served as a background.

In his *L'art du jardin et son histoire*, John Dixon Hunt has masterfully demonstrated how this bias for the image is almost written in the genes of the historiography of garden architecture, 'which took on real form for the first time during the celebrated period of the English landscape garden'. That is to say, it happened precisely at the time 'that the concept of the garden as an autonomous form of expression disappeared almost totally', and in fact became subordinate to landscape painting.³ The great disadvantage of historiography of this sort is that the art of garden itself, as well as landscape art of which it is only 'the most refined form', is barely touched upon. Such an approach passes over what the landscape designs fundamentally are, namely a series of territorial representations that, in the words of Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot, are constructed *in situ* on the 'interface of architecture and topography.'⁴ Thus Hunt calls for the creation of a new way of shaping theory about writing the history of gardens, one which begins with the acknowledgement of this art form as *sui generis*. 'The foundations of an adequate theory must be found in the practice of landscape architecture itself.'⁵ This is precisely what the point of departure has been for the Delft research laboratory from the very beginning, one which is also expressed in the subtitle of this book: *Architecture and Landscape: The Design Experiment of the Great European Gardens and Landscapes*.

The fundamental intention of the book is summed up in those few words. Although it is certainly its intention to look at landscape creations as 'architectures', and therefore to

investigate them as designed, three-dimensional constructions (and not merely as significant compendiums of the visual culture from a particular period), it does not consider them as subordinate, or as a subspecies of a discipline that has its real centre of gravity somewhere else, in the 'building'. In other words, its undertaking is not only to investigate what architecture does with the landscape on the evidence of these gardens, but more important, to investigate what influence the landscape has had on architecture, and thereby to expose how the point of departure for a genuine design culture lies in the conjunction of these two.⁶

The best evidence of this genuine character, demonstrated throughout the book, is the way landscape creations challenge the usual tools of architectural representation, such as ground plan, section and elevation. Gardens – and in particular the examples discussed in this book – pose specific problems of representation, which can differ from case to case, but may all be traced back to the peculiar nature of landscape design.

Landscape versus architecture

Before continuing my argument, I would first here briefly attempt to distinguish this concept of landscape design. I would define a landscape architectonic intervention as the conscious interpretation, modulation or transformation of a given territorial situation or substratum, i. e. of a 'site'. This implies of course that a good awareness of the previously existing qualities and potentials of the location involved (in a formal, material and cultural sense) is crucial to a proper understanding of such an intervention, but moreover, it means that the way this intervention envisages the world and the landscape *in situ* is basically what defines the meaning and the devices of the garden. Architecture works in another manner. Although every building is of course located in a particular spot, its relation to the site involved can in principle be reduced to a question of situation, access, orientation and finally of foundations. The site is then nothing more than the surface destined for the structure that is to rise upon it, which will peremptorily impose there the logic of its own programme. Our thesis is that the encounter, the negotiation between the site and the programme, which comes about with every project, is quite different for a building than for a garden. While in the case of architecture the site is looked at in light of the programme, and may even develop from it, we see the opposite happen in landscape design: here it is rather the programme which is envisioned through the site, and may even be inspired or engendered by it. If one reserves the term 'building' for architecture, then one is justified in speaking of a discipline of 'foundation', in order to designate that other design experi-

ment in which a site (an element of the world) is given form, featured, staged, and thus translated into an accessible, liveable and consistent representation of the world.

It comes as a consequence of this subtle (and nevertheless clear) distinction between architecture and landscape that a landscape design is essentially relative to – one could even say 'adjective' to – its subject, i. e. the site to which it confers certain qualities, interpretations and accents. Hence the necessity, if one intends to grasp and explain those interventions, of developing oblique tools of chorography, somewhere between the ground plan and the elevation, the topographic survey and the cross section, the map and the axonometry, etc. It is not coincidental that the bird's-eye view and the 'vue cavalière' were the most important methods for depicting the classical garden: after all they do help the viewer to locally relate art and nature, the intervention and the site, architecture and topography, on the scale of the whole design. However – even if we leave aside the delicate issue of their reliability – these conventional images are by themselves too scarce, too strictly axial, and basically unsuitable for investigating the detail of this confrontation, tension or osmosis between site and architecture. In order to account for the spatial, tectonic or atmospheric effects of landscape design and to understand its specific mechanisms, one needs to devise other methods and instruments. And this is why a handful of historians or more conscientious researchers have been led to fashion their own tools themselves. Good examples of this are the situation drawings by Benevolo in *La Cattura dell'infinito*,⁷ the series of sketches that Hazlehurst used to study the telescopic longitudinal axes of Le Nôtre's gardens,⁸ or elementary analysis layer by layer (buildings and earthworks, water, planting) as it is systematically applied by Moore, Mitchell and Turnbull in *The Poetics of Gardens*.⁹

An optical journey in the history and complexity of gardens

But even through these several independent initiatives – often the work of architects – one only rarely penetrates to the heart of the matter. By confining themselves (in all the meanings of the term) within the limits of the intervention, they help at describing the spatial organisation of the garden or park, but less the transformation of the site. As one reviews the examples mentioned above, it becomes clear how great a leap forward *Architecture and Landscape* represents. The writers of this work have not restricted themselves to using these inventions once again, or adding many new ones to them, calling on contemporary techniques for architectonic and landscape illustration – something which would in itself have been no small advance.

Through their work at the interface of architecture and topography they have moreover developed new kinds of oblique diagrams or perspectives through which we understand the complex interplay and dialectics between site and programme which comes about in these creations. The magnificent prints, in which the structures of the garden have been drawn in transparently in the relief of the substratum, as through they were gigantic fossil ships, are maybe the most startling. On the basis of the three-dimensional images, they provide insight as never before into the subtle process of negotiation through which those great landscape achievements were produced. But it is also the diversity of the techniques used in the book which is particularly striking, as if each period, each style, each culture, and ultimately each site was crying out for specific tools of description and analysis, and this despite the well-documented circulation of models and the endless game of influences, imitations and obvious references upon which traditional garden historians and scholars love to expatiate. To my mind, one of the greatest services rendered by this book is that it allows every individual site to speak for itself, in doing so acting modestly as a guide or an annotated catalogue of situations: in it the several parks and gardens analysed are not only dealt with as many significant steps or moments in the evolution of classical landscape art over three centuries and three cultural styles but also as unique places, where these developments have accumulated into successive layers, and formed specific palimpsests.

This great merit of *Architecture and Landscape* – the way it combines several perspectives – is undoubtedly related to the fact that the book is a cooperative project, but can also be explained by the commitment to bring together results and discoveries from various investigations that the two authors had performed independently, in collaboration with others. Thus three books, each devoted to one of the three important periods in the structure given (Rationalism/Italy/Renaissance; Formalism/France/Baroque; Picturesque/England/Enlightenment) formed the background out of which this one arose. Their titles are *Italian Villas and Gardens* (1992), a collaboration by Paul van der Ree, Gerrit Smienk and Clemens Steenbergen; *De stap over de horizon* (1990), the dissertation by Clemens Steenbergen; and *Arcadia en Metropolis* (1996), the dissertation by Wouter Reh.¹⁰ On the other hand, new studies have also since arisen precisely from the stimulation and authority of the book, and can be more or less considered its sequels. That is particularly the case for *The Enclosed Garden*, by Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, which with the same ambitions explores the fascinating traditions (barely mapped out so far) of the cloister garden and the *giardino segreto*, thereby demon-

strating clearly how these supposedly pre-modern types can be followed throughout history and how their syntaxes may fruitfully be extrapolated in contemporary cities and territories.¹¹

Towards a genealogy of sub-urbanism

It is of course no accident that these remarkable studies of European garden and landscape culture come from The Netherlands. Much has already been written about the artificial character of the Dutch landscape and the absolutely unique ability of the Dutch to see and analyse the landscape as a human construction. We also know of the exceptionally vital practice of contemporary Dutch architects, and how much today's architectonic and urban planning discussion owes to the theoretical creativity of a handful of Flying Dutchmen. All these circumstances have their part in the progress that the Delft research laboratory has made in the field of landscape and its historiography. But there is still another element of Dutchness there, which is definitely worth calling to the attention of researchers and professionals who will benefit from these studies: I have in mind here the willingness to carry out an enterprise cooperatively, the capacity to place diverse contributions next to each other and link them one to another, the intention to work together even if opinions in the discussion diverge. This productive discussion can be detected not only from the diverse subjects and themes that the members of the group have chosen to investigate, but also (for the attentive reader) within *Architecture and Landscape*. It functions as the secret motor behind a workshop whose theoretical project is strong enough to bear contradictions, to bridge them or even to feed from them.

I would like to call this sphere of theoretical activity 'sub-urbanism'. All projects, irrespective of their scale or nature, which work from site to programme, can be subsumed in this. The use of the term sub-urbanism has three advantages. The first is of course that it points at the 'substratum' of our practice of design and planning, revealing the site or the landscape as being the actual subject, the ultimate 'infrastructure' which the project is about. The second advantage is that it features this approach as an alternative to urbanism. In the 150 years that the term urbanism has been used, it has almost always consisted in reasserting, at the scale of cities and regions, the primacy of the programme – which obviously is more congenial to architecture and to the scale of buildings – yet without wondering whether such an extrapolation is appropriate. Finally, the third advantage of this term is at one and the same time political and historic in nature: namely, the acknowledgement of the fact that suburbia, this uncertain state between city and countryside, has simultaneously been

the birthplace, the experimental garden and even the very utopia of this particular design discipline which in turn has amply contributed to fashioning its specific forms and *imaginaires*, before they started to spread in all directions, even deep into the cities. *Architecture and Landscape*, by exclusively concentrating on the great changes in the *villa suburbana* in Europe, brings clearly this simple truth to light: namely the fact that the history of landscape architecture in a certain sense can be characterised as the application and development of the concept of suburbia, and that, in a period in which suburbanisation in fact has become our condition, one can perhaps find in this history some of the fundamental components of a theory which has yet to be fully developed. *Architecture and Landscape*, as a space-time journey through the genealogy of modern sub-urbanism, is thus also, in its own way, a kind of 'retroactive manifesto'.

To conclude, *Architecture and Landscape* is a must read for at least two reasons. The first one is that, more than many other books before, as we have seen, it provides us with deep insight into the several landscape architectonic masterpieces it discusses. And the second is that the book (almost in passing, as it were) is instrumental in unravelling the conventional tradition of urbanism, guided and limited by the idea of the city and the centrifugal logic that flows from it, and posits a sort of reverse image. In shifting our attention toward those suburban achievements and by looking upon them as genuine laboratories for another kind of design experiment, it is ultimately the meaning of spatial design as such that *Architecture and Landscape* induces us to reconsider. Students in design disciplines, whether they focus on architecture, urban planning or landscape design itself, can learn a lot – first and foremost, to reflect on the subject – by mentally replaying the several geotechnic chess games that this book analyses and stages for them. By the way, it is not surprising that the chess board so often played a significant role in gardens. Cannot all gardens and – in a broader perspective – all territorial situations be analysed as chess problems, brought about by series of previous moves, which one can more or less reconstitute, and loaded, vibrating with others, still latent?¹²

1. See the collectively written *Architectural Design and Research: Composition, Education, Analysis* (published by the architecture department of the TU Delft), Bussum, 2000, as well as: Steenbergen, Van der Kooij, Aben, *Buiten Plaats, city escape*, TU Delft, 2000.

2. [Literally 'from on horseback' or as a mounted officer would have on a battlefield, thus more generally from any slightly raised position; translator].

3. John Dixon Hunt, *L'art du jardin et son histoire*, Paris, 1996. To date, this text, a collection of two lectures given at the Collège de France in March, 1994, has not been published in English, but similar reflections can be found in John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory*, Philadelphia, 2000.

4. Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot, 'L'architecture du jardin et l'architecture dans le jardin', in M. Mosser and G. Teyssot, *Histoire des jardins de la Renaissance à nos jours*, Paris, 1991, p. 8.

5. Hunt, *ibid.*, p. 19.

6. According to the authors in the first edition, *Architecture and Landscape* is a new tool for present-day and future landscape architects and urban designers. It is intended to provide a profound insight into the way in which this design tradition has developed in Europe, and argues for landscape architecture as an autonomous discipline that distinguishes itself from architecture and urban planning.

7. Leonardo Benevolo, *La Cattura dell'infinito*, Rome and Bari, 1991.

8. F. Hamilton Hazlehurst, *Gardens of Illusions: The Genius of André le Nostre*, Nashville, 1980.

9. Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell and William Turnbull, Jr., *The Poetics of Gardens*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988.

10. P. van der Ree, G. Smienk and C. Steenbergen, *Italian Villas and Gardens. A corso di disegno* (Amsterdam, New York, 1992); C. Steenbergen, *De stap over de horizon. Een ontleding van het formele ontwerp in de landschapsarchitectuur* (The step beyond the horizon. An analysis of formal design in landscape architecture) (Delft, 1990); and W. Reh, *Arcadia en Metropolis. Het landschaps-experiment van de verlichting* (Arcadia and Metropolis. The landscape experiment of the Enlightenment). (TU Delft, 1996).

11. R. Aben and S. De Wit, *The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the hortus conclusus*, OIO Publishers, Rotterdam, 1999. (First published as: *De omsloten tuin. Geschiedenis en ontwikkeling van de hortus conclusus en de herintroductie ervan in het hedendaagse stadslandschap*. Rotterdam 1998).

12. Regarding the place of the chess board in the garden, and in particular in the *hortus ludi*, see Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit, *ibid.* The comparison of the landscape architect with a chess player appears several times in Steenbergen's publications: 'Apart from stage director, creator, dramatist and choreographer, the landscape architect finally is also a chess player who, like the Emperor Kublai Kahn, as he attentively followed the moves of Marco Polo, notices that certain pieces implied or excluded the proximity of other pieces, and that they move along fixed lines. Neglecting the differences in form between the objects, Kublai Kahn described the way in which they were ordered with regard to each other on the tiled floor. He thought, "If every city is like a game of chess, when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my kingdom".' Clemens Steenbergen, 'Teatro Rustico. The formal strategy and grammar of landscape architecture', in *Modern Park Design: Recent Trends*, Bussum, 1993, pp. 132-133.