

THE TRANSPOSED MEANING OF THE GARDEN

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Abstract

The most fertile disputes about the paradigmatic nature of the garden have dated from the 18th century. The majority of the researchers and theoreticians in garden art have stated that there is no ideal pattern of the garden, but a series of complex transpositions, phenomenon which allows us to affirm that the garden may be looked upon as a semiotic object. The Chinese garden, as well as the Japanese one, have been present in our cultural context as a result of a transposition. The transpositions chain helps us to understand the conception of the English garden which is very dependent on the transposition of the French landscape painting and the description of the Chinese gardens. The English garden has resulted from a double transposition: the concomitant transposition of the French painting from the 18th century and of the Chinese garden (we mean the Chinese garden not taken in se, but as it was described in the journals and journey tales beginning with the end of the 17th century). The Italian garden, transposed in French painting, which in turn has been transposed in English garden, represents an example of “text in text”, very complex from a semiotic point of view. Even if the patterns presented in our research have never been met in pure condition and are liable to transposition and interpretation, becoming elements of an intertextuality difficult to control, it seems that there are also constant structures deeply rooted in an emotional profoundness which irradiates to universal.

Key words: semiotics, garden, pattern, transposition, intertextuality.

Gardening is no longer the preserve of the few; it is there to be enjoyed by us all; there is a wider interest in gardening and a greater diversity of design ideas than ever before. The planting palette is extending all the time, as is the range of materials that can be used for the garden’s “hard ware”, but seldom are the ideas of the day truly original. We could say that a fresh spin is put on concepts whose roots lie in earlier centuries. Though they may made innovative use of plastic, glass, and stainless steel, today’s designers still apply spatial theories first formulated in 16th century Italy and adapt Islamic style layouts developed more than a thousand years ago in Iran and Iraq. The designers, gardeners and landscape architects have tried to shape the present and future look of the gardens, but in so doing they have nearly always kept an eye on the past. What we should like to demonstrate in the present research is the fact that there is no ideal pattern of the garden but a series of complex transpositions, phenomenon which allows us to affirm that the garden may be looked upon as a *semiotic* object.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Written documents and illustrations that have been handed down to us from past centuries, excavations of temple gardens, palaces and garden remains help us to realize that the human striving to shape our natural surroundings and to

change them to satisfy our aesthetic feelings, began before the Christian era.

The first evidence of the gardener’s art is to be found in the ancient world. Right up to the present day, constantly changing forms of artistically designed gardens have appeared, in harmony with the *architecture* and *pictorial arts*, closely related to and conditioned by social, material and technical developments. Whenever peace and tranquillity have ruled the land, there has been a new desire to get closer to nature and there have been great advances in gardening. All this gardening construction would not have been possible without the ideas and the creative abilities of the garden designers, working together with numerous numbers from other professions and trades, who translated their ideas into practical reality and devoted themselves to the care and maintenance of the gardens.

Since culture is always both a cause and effect of particular political, economic, and technological circumstances as well as of cosmological and philosophical attitudes, each age and country leaves its own legacy, signifying in large measure its type of governance, degree of wealth, and level of construction skills, as well as its political character and religious beliefs. All of these things are given form through the tastes and talents of patrons and designers. Indeed, the tastes of patrons and the talents of designers could not be exercised in the same manner, nor would the style and iconographic content of their work be as it is, in the absence of particular combinations of

governance, wealth, and technology as informed by philosophical thought. By way of example, one may say that work of the great seventeenth-century French landscape designer André Le Nôtre expresses the authoritarianism of Louis XIV's regime, the prosperity of the French economy under the management of the finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the development of new means of constructing earthworks by the military engineer Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, and the application of the mathematical philosophy of René Descartes to the art of landscape design. To say this does not diminish our estimation of Le Nôtre's genius; it merely furnishes the conditions and parameters of its flowering.

Gardens speak of the intimate relationship between man and the environment. Arabic and Persian gardens celebrate water, providing a haven from the harsh realities of the desert life. Zen gardens were designed to replicate the perfection of the natural world in miniature – a single garden encompassing an entire world. From the contemplative, tranquil spaces of the Japanese gardens to the scientific imagery and visual trickery of Charles Jencks' Garden of Cosmic Speculation, these are gardens that are sometimes startlingly unusual, but always interesting and beautiful.

The Persian Garden is the origin of the Islamic garden, so, with the spread of Islam, the characteristics of Persian gardens were transmitted to all corners of the Islamic world. We still find evidence today of this *dispersion*, in the Moorish gardens of Spain, among others. In the middle of every Persian garden a reservoir was to be found from which canals or rivers proceeded in four directions. The symbolic quartering of the gardens by running water was a direct reference to Paradise, the Garden of Eden, from which, supposedly four rivers flowed. Paths were laid out around the reservoir and between these paths there were flower-beds at regular intervals. Also characteristic of the Islamic garden are pavilions and covered seating, which were either placed around the reservoir or most picturesquely on a small island at their centre. In a later period they were richly ornamented.

As well as in its completely different topography and its own distinctive forms of expression, the Chinese art of gardening differs from European landscape gardens above all in the interpretation and significance of the individual elements, from which emerges a combination and arrangement which depict a symbolization of nature. This desire goes back to Taoism, a philosophy which believes in an immanent order and harmony in nature which remains hidden from man and will only materialize in the moment of "enlightenment".

The gardens of China reveal the oldest and most continual civilization the world has ever seen. For thousands of years they have expressed a distinctively Chinese understanding of the universe. The Chinese deeply love nature – wind,

water, mountains, trees and flowers – but have never sought to master it. In the Chinese garden, nature and human being are partners in a space that is designed to "stand in" for the totality of the universe.

The relative unimportance of plants is the most immediate difference between the garden-making traditions of China and those of the West. The Chinese garden is not particularly green and it is *built* rather than *planted*. Stones and water, which both have great symbolic significance, are its prime components. Plants are accessories, yet they are charged with literary, artistic and philosophical meanings. By constantly celebrating the association of certain flowers and trees with certain sentiments and seasons, the gardens of China are a source of emotional refreshment and intellectual stimulation. And although there is no one essential model, every Chinese garden has been designed to reflect and affirm the infinite rhythms of nature. The language of the traditional Chinese garden has always spoken more of digging cavities for water and piling up rocks than planting.

The characters that combine to make the Chinese word for landscape (*shanshui*) are mountains and water. The mountains that seem to touch Heaven are likened to the "bones" of the Earth's body, whose "veins" are its watercourses. In the Chinese garden, the universal bone structure of mountains, in the shape of artificial hills and rockeries, and the "blood" of water, in the shape of streams and ponds, interact as complementary opposites, just as the interaction of Yin, the soft female force, and Yang, the hard masculine force, is thought to underpin all natural happenings and all human behaviour. Every aspect of Chinese civilization is pervaded by the harmonious relationship between these complementary opposites, the Yin and Yang. In *painting* the Yin–Yang balance of the universe can be expressed in terms of light and shade, in gardening it is most decidedly expressed by mountains and water.

In China the *art of gardening* and the *art of painting* are inseparable. Garden-makers were also painters, as well as scholars, calligraphers and poets. Their works were created and considered with the same eye and the same sense of nature; so the white walls that rise behind the rocks and trees of a garden landscape are directly comparable with the blank silk background of a painted landscape. The garden with its changing light and atmosphere, from dawn to dusk and through the seasons, became a landscape scroll, through which it was possible to stroll as if through a three-dimensional painting.

Each garden was conceived as a microcosm of the universe whose prime components were, as we have already mentioned, rocks and water, over which the rhythms of the seasons swept in the form of plants and trees. Contrasts and juxtapositions – high and low, light and dark,

narrow corridors yielding to wide spaces – conspired to create the illusion of infinity. The visitor could appreciate these gardens by strolling through a series of vistas, which unfolded like a painted landscape scroll, or by pausing at designated fixed points.

The Japanese garden is a unique achievement, of major importance and influence in the West. More than any other people, the Japanese have succeeded in endowing the art of garden-making with transcendental meaning. They have never perceived nature as something “other” and apart, and this sense of oneness of creation is a consistent theme in the story of their inspirational gardens. The great gardens of Japan have a timeless quality. Of course, Japanese garden style has never remained static. New ideas were introduced as time went on. The ideal garden of the 11th century, as described by *Sakuteiki*, drew on scenes from *Yamato-e* paintings, which were fashionable at the time, and reproduced them in *three-dimensional* form. During the Kamakura Period in the 13th century, Japanese gardeners eagerly adopted the latest Chinese trends. At that time, Chinese pictures favored the monochrome *suiboku-ga* ink-painting style, with its emphasis on controlled expression. In imitation of this painting style, especially distinctive rocks appeared in clumps, symbolizing mountains that rose above expanses of white sand, which in turn symbolized the ocean. This was the *karesansui* (dry landscape) style, which became an ideal during the 14th and 15th centuries.

But in Japan the triumph of imported values and teachings did not spell defeat for native traditions. For centuries, the Japanese have composed garden scenes using *shakkei* (“borrowed scenery”) principles – distant vistas are considered when designing the garden, and used as part of the overall effect. *Shakkei* techniques spread quickly in Japan, and are often used to this day. Although the Japanese gardens have changed over time, old practices were not abandoned with the introduction of new ones. New styles are eagerly embraced and added to older ones that continue to exist. Still, it must be remembered that the best Japanese gardens have not simply added new elements, but have carefully selected only elements that fit the true nature of the setting. In this sense, the process is not one of addition, but of subtraction, of restraining the imagination and refining the composition.

Almost all of the garden styles that have developed since the 11th century can still be seen in or near Kyoto, and these gardens have not changed greatly over the centuries. In this way, too, Japan finds itself in a unique position in the world. For example, tea was introduced to Japan from China in the 13th century. By the 15th century, the tea ceremony had developed into a distinctive Japanese ritual. This tea ritual exerted considerable influence on garden design. Tea masters used to arrange stepping-stones in an

artistic and practical way so that guests approaching the teahouse would not trample the moss. To illuminate the path for after-dark ceremonies, they used the same type of stone lantern seen beside shrine and temple lanes. These lanterns quickly became popular garden items, and are now considered an essential element in traditional Japanese gardens.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The aim of garden design, as of landscape planning, is to make good outdoor space. This requires us to understand the nature of the world. One must appreciate *what* can be changed and *how* it can be changed. Approaches to understanding the nature of place, through art, science and religion, yield different views of outdoor space: of how it can be moulded and of the degree to which it should remain unchanged. The “ideal” garden has always been in the mind, a way of thinking about nature and culture and how they influence each other. Thus the garden is a balancing point between human control and “wild” nature.

In ancient times the garden was at first an oasis, a refuge, an escape from the threats of nature. Over the centuries emperors and kings developed fantastic parks to express their power and personality. In the Renaissance architects played with the manipulation of space and studied optics to produce academic gardens to satisfy the intellect – geometry and repetition applied to nature. In the 18th century, garden and nature became philosophically intertwined, with schemes to emulate nature in her natural state, in reality as contrived and designed as the formal layouts of earlier periods. These natural landscapes were the forerunners of the public recreational parks of today.

Respect for the potential of landscape to produce mental sensations through association caused garden designers to gather into their repertoire of effects images of a *poetic* and *painterly* nature, especially at first those that evoked the antique past through classical forms and pastoral Arcadian motifs. The garden became no longer a stage for the display of power, an arena of social interaction, but a place for solitary or companionable reflection and contemplation. Locke’s philosophy thus provides a key for those who would ponder the meaning of miniature temples, ruins, grottoes, and grazing deer in the 18th century English landscape park.

Though much earlier in its origins, the East Asian garden was equally a place of poetic association and friendship. As in England, in China and Japan the associative potential of garden scenery was an important design consideration. In China, the talents of *poet*, *painter*, and *garden*

designer were fused, often in the same persons. These artists enjoyed an especially close relationship with nature, and their compositions evoke the precipitous peaks of certain mountainous parts of their country. Derived from China, Japanese garden design is also premised upon a great deal of naturalistic rockwork, although the carefully arranged, flatter, less contorted stones in Japanese gardens understandably reflect more that country's island scenery than the topography of its mainland neighbour. The rocks in both Chinese and Japanese gardens are replete with symbolical associations. Plants, too, enjoy a symbolic function, and appreciation of selected species, such as peonies, chrysanthemums, plum trees, and bamboo is focused and intense.

A history of landscape design is obviously a history of human culture. It should be located in the broadest sense in relation to values of time and space, but also more specifically as an art historical pursuit, seeking to demonstrate how philosophical concepts, and not only ideals of beauty, are expressed through art – in this case, an art that modifies and shapes nature. A history of landscape design is one way of writing the history of the human mind.

Gardens may be considered the products of attitudes toward the cosmos, nature, and humanity and they share elements of form and meaning with artefacts from the disciplines with which they are most intimately, and often inextricably, allied: *painting, sculpture, architecture, and the decorative arts* – as well as with *literature* and other means of ideological expression. Landscape design is thus a narrative of a relationship between human beings and their world and of their attempts to invest nature with purposeful order and meaning and specific places with expressive form and heightened *significance*.

In tracing patterns of influence, it is apparent that *form* follows *culture*, but, once developed, *form* often follows *form*. For example, the revival of the forms of Greek and Roman art and architecture during the Renaissance and later periods of Western history exemplifies the ways in which people of other eras and in other places have found in the forms forged in antiquity an expressive design vocabulary for their own particular aspirations. *Transmission* may also occur more directly, moving along the paths of military adventure and trade, as when the formal innovations of one country are exported to, or imported by, another through conquest and assimilation. Such was the case from the fourth through the second centuries B.C.E. as Alexander the Great's far-flung Hellenistic empire carried Greek forms to the farthest reaches of the

Mediterranean basin and beyond to Persia. Similarly, in early 16th century France, the development of the French Renaissance garden was based upon direct imitation of Italian Renaissance garden principles and the immigration to France of Italian garden designers following the Neapolitan campaign of the French king, Charles VIII.

As history shows, the concept of the Japanese garden was born out of compromise, in China. During the rule of the Tang dynasty, a fashion had developed among Chinese poets and painters to withdraw from the city to the mountains to work on their art in peace. A few centuries later (around the 14th century), a compromise was made to this trend. Instead of retreating to the hills, artists began replicating the wilds in urban spaces. This "wilderness gardening", as it was called, later came to be a trademark of the Sung dynasty. But like all things Chinese, it soon went to Japan where it got its final sophisticated form. And even began to be known as the Japanese garden, the world over. But just as the Japanese assimilated Chinese garden concepts along with Buddhism beginning in the 6th century and then developed out of this beginning their own indigenous approach to garden making, so too did those who followed the French Renaissance garden designers evolve from their forms ones that were distinctive to French culture, which were subsequently *adopted, adapted, and altered* by others elsewhere.

CONCLUSIONS

When we examine space in terms of psychology and phenomenology we find that we are still place-bound creatures, carrying in the recesses of our memories personal histories of spaces we have inhabited and imagined. Further, we carry "placeness" in our genes and in our sensory apparatus as human beings, and because biological nature is still the matrix of our existence we long to feel at one with the natural world.

As accelerating mobility and speed of communications continue to shrink distance and collapse time, *place* becomes increasingly provisional and temporary. Humans are in a fundamental way *place-making* animals, revealing in this act their individual and collective dreams. The landscapes that people create are combinations of *artifice* and *nature*, and in designing them people of every period have revealed a great deal about their cultural values while demonstrating the perennial exigencies of life and our universal need for water, food, and shelter. Perhaps as we reanimate our spiritual selves, develop new culturally sustaining myths, and reunite science

with religion and philosophy, we will be able to create places that are life-sustaining in a truer sense than now.

The Garden of Eden has been an inexhaustible model and cherished goal for the designers of large gardens throughout the centuries, aspiring to the human ideal of life in Paradise. The GARDEN, in particular, "has always meant structured yearning, a sentimental return to a Golden Age and at the same time a step towards Utopia", wrote the famous scientists C.F. Schröer – "it represents an attempt to recover a lost paradise on earth, to anticipate the promised kingdom of Heaven. The path to this goal is one of reconciliation with nature. The dream of Paradise encompasses both intimacy and Utopia: day-dream, the escape into the idyllic, a low value placed on reality, and at the same time a new departure, a will for change and a desire for freedom."

The desert-born Arabs treasured water, they loved to see it give life to plants, to hear the sound of its movement, to feel it cool the air. The gardens of the Arabian-designed Alhambra Castle in Spain's Granada, struck us by its resemblance to a walled Mughal Garden. Cool pools mirrored the sky, fountains splashed, avenues led the eye to illusions of endless space. All these features were adopted by the Saracen Emirs when they conquered Sicily and they were then taken over by the Normans when they ousted the Saracens in the 11th century. Slowly, these garden styles spread to Italy and, from there, they were carried into France when the French over-ran Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The French, however, gave their own touch to the Arabian idiom. They felt no need to create oases of coolness and they also had more space to reach out and expand. Most importantly they were driven by their compulsive *sense of order*. Flower beds, walks, ponds and avenues had to be geometrically perfect. They even used brick dust, earth and sand to create stylised patterns. Their gardens spread like exquisitely woven carpets around their palaces, and in spite of, so-called, "Frenchified ways" being scorned by many Englishmen, the formality of the Versailles style did have an impact on English garden design. In 18th century England, however, the rigidity of the Versailles style began to be shunned. This movement had much to do with England's increasing interest in trade with China. Inevitably Chinese ideas of natural harmony rather than formal symmetry, crept into England. In 1772 the English architect Sir William Chambers wrote his famous *Dissertation On Oriental Gardens*. English landscape designers, who were largely architects or

artists, turned their backs on the "tyranny of the straight line", and began to create "natural gardens". These had meandering streams and lakes, stone bridges and massive plantings of trees and even the flower beds followed the contours of the land.

Of all the great gardening traditions preceding the 20th century, gardens associated with Islamic dominance over several hundred years, in the West as well as the East represent an ideological continuity which is unique in its spread and development over a wide range of geographical and cultural regions. In comparison, the art of garden design as it evolved in Europe from the 16th to the 18th century was at the time geographically limited in its extent and influence – the classical proportions of the villa gardens of Renaissance Italy, later the grand theatrical settings of Baroque compositions in France, and finally the revolutionary "irregularity" of the Picturesque or English Landscape Style – each one of which was of immense artistic significance no doubt, but confined in its development and refinement to Europe alone.

It should be stressed that to understand designed landscapes, as well as human attitudes toward natural ones, one must venture beyond the important areas of political, economic, and technological history into the realms of cosmology, religion, science, and metaphysics. The physical world, as shaped by thought and action, mirrors the human mind as a theatre of myth, ritual, allegory, and reason. So, too, the mind's capacity for sensation and reflection finds expression in the shaping and furnishing of landscape space, as does the human desire for public ceremony and personal pleasure.

Even if the patterns presented in our research have never been found in pure condition and are liable to *transposition* and interpretation, becoming elements of an intertextuality difficult to control, it seems that there are also constant structures deeply rooted in an emotional profoundness which irradiates to universal.

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