

landscape design

GARDENS

IMAGES : JONATHAN HAWLEY



LE GRANDE

THE GARDENS OF VERSAILLES ARE A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THE BEAUTY THAT CAN BE ATTAINED WHERE ART AND HORTICULTURE MELD ON A TRULY GRAND SCALE. CARRYING ON THAT TRADITION IN THE FORMER VEGGIE GARDEN OF THE FRENCH PALACE IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE SCHOOLS. **JULIAN RAXWORTHY**, A SENIOR LECTURER IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY RECENTLY TAUGHT A WORKSHOP AT THE VERSAILLES SCHOOL. AS HE EXPLAINS, THE CONCEPTS THAT UNDERLIE THE SCHOOL'S TEACHING AND THE FORMAL GRANDEUR OF THE GARDENS OF VERSAILLES CONTINUE TO BE AS INNOVATIVE AND RELEVANT TODAY AS THEY WERE IN THE 17TH CENTURY



Few gardens conjure up such grandeur as the gardens of Versailles. Possibly the most famous and excessive of all the world's great gardens, they were designed in the late 1600s by Baroque garden designer André Le Nôtre, for the French Sun King (Le Roi-Soleil), Louis XIV. The estate comprises grand formal gardens that stretch out to the horizon along enormous axes, with a complex system of smaller gardens contained in geometric parterres, and a vast array of fountains and pools. Louis saw the gardens as the great achievement of his court at Versailles, and he personally wrote a guidebook called

The Way to Present the Gardens of Versailles, setting forth his ideal tour.

Le Nôtre inherited the role of Royal Gardener at the Tuilleries in Paris from his father and set about establishing a system of interlocking axes and sub-spaces, delineating strict grids with rows of trees. This system opened up the enclosed garden into geographic territory, restructuring the city between the Louvre and the Concorde. Building on the intimate garden geometry of the medieval cloister and the expansion of the Renaissance axis, Le Nôtre took Baroque garden design, and landscape architecture to its zenith.



When Le Nôtre retired, Louis awarded him nobility and a title but despite this, he somehow stayed outside all the political manoeuvring of the court, even though his creations were enormous political trinkets. Le Nôtre is the quintessential (and first), landscape architect, but he remained the humble gardener to the end.

But Versailles is much more than just a garden or a Chateau, it is also a territorial centre and perhaps, the first suburban subdivision. The town is integrally aligned to the layout of the garden, with the composition of the garden and its parterres establishing the location of the main avenues and the street layout. The garden is both a form of organisation and a type of branding, no different to how landscape is now used to organise and market contemporary Australian suburbia. Many suburbs are organised around the layout of the landscape – and water bodies in particular – and these are then used in marketing to give ambiance or status to a development.

The organisation of Versailles was also for the convenience of Louis to access his court, and for the court to come, trembling, to him. Like a web, avenues extend from Versailles all around Paris to meet other estates (and gardens by Le Nôtre), and make Paris appear to be the court's play thing: as though Paris rather than Versailles had come later.

While Louis was adamant that the gardens of Versailles be aesthetically pleasing, he was also interested in productive gardening, albeit on a much smaller scale, and established Le Potager

du Roi, the Kings Vegetable Garden, adjacent to the main gardens of the Chateau. It was accessed via the Orangerie, where fruit trees were wheeled out amongst palms, and then along the Pièce d'eau (The Water Mirror of the Swiss), a long pool. This was the route that Louis took to enter the garden from his palace through enormous gilded gates and on the King's arrival workers would conceal themselves in alcoves in the stone terraces. The garden was not designed by Le Nôtre, but by La Quintinie, the Kings Vegetable Gardener, in 1663 and is remarkable not for the layout which is simple and generic, but by how this simple two-dimensional layout controls the three dimensional micro-climate of the garden.

In its centre is a quadrangle featuring a large circular pool that is surrounded by a grid of garden beds. This central quadrangle is lower than the surrounding garden, which in turn is enclosed by an even higher walled terrace. Beyond this are a further 29 other walled gardens all of which were set at different levels to make the best use of the solar orientation, wind and air movement. This allowed different parts of the garden to have a different climate and enable the production of fruit and vegetables, out of season and from climatically different countries. Espaliered fruit trees edge many of the beds, adding more walls and further subdividing spaces, both ornamental and functional.

The garden has continued to be a working one and in 1850 became the site for a horticulture

school. Over one hundred years later in 1972, the horticulture school began teaching landscape design, and it is now the Ecole Nationale Supérieure du Paysage (ENSP Versailles). In the midst of Le Nôtre's creation, and in his spirit, it has become one of the world's premier schools of landscape architecture.

A two-story building from the 17th century lines one edge of the Potager housing the design studios and workspaces. The course is a three-year post-graduate diploma and is one of only two courses in France that teach landscape architecture. Entry is tough and competitive, as are the subsequent expectations of the students who are often found working in the studios around the clock. Each year level is given its own walled garden to work on that they use as a community space and each year the best garden is awarded. Like getting dirty in the garden, students also make art with their hands in the first year of the course.

Gardening is an important link to Le Nôtre, that emphasises an understanding of scale. Students must understand the landscape both at the scale of the plant as well as that of the broad landscape, as Le Nôtre himself did. At the Versailles school the landscape and the garden are the same thing, since the one contains the other, and both are made up through similar natural and cultural processes. This is the notion of 'territory' that underpins the school, developed by its contemporary fathers.

After the fervour of the 1968 student



revolution in Paris, two former students of the horticulture school, Jacques Simon, a filmmaker and then his pupil Michel Corajoud founded the more progressive ENSP and revolutionised its teachings through the establishment of its current studio based education in the garden and their development of this territorial view.

Simon was an artist who produced a particularly French version of Land Art – a 1960s art movement that used the natural environment to create large-scale works (its most prominent practitioner being the American Robert Smithson, famous for his Spiral Jetty). Though the Americans created pure abstract forms in the landscape – the only space big enough to take them – Simon's version of Land Art sought to reveal the qualities of the landscape, a landscape shaped by human occupation. Using the tools of agriculture, the tools of the Potager, Simon ploughed phrases into fields, melted them into snow, burned them into stubble.

Corajoud's interests were complementary but his approach was quite different. Both were united by a rebellion against the uselessness and the privacy of the garden, in the face of the exponential urbanisation of France and Europe in general. While Simon came from an art background, Courajoud was more interested in architecture and planning. He rejected the dominance of the garden in the Versailles course and its exclusivity. He felt that architecture and planning were better tools to learn how to work with the shape of the city, but these could lead

to dehumanised places. This led him to assert landscape architecture as a positive, democratic and humane force of urbanisation. He sought to value banal broad-scale landscapes of the public domain rather than the small private fascination of the garden.

To consider Le Nôtre and the Potager, and then the subsequent course that Simon and Corajoud established there is to be struck by the scale of the garden. Le Notre showed us that the garden is exactly what we think it is – plants, water, outdoor activity – but that its scale can be increased to the point where it becomes the landscape. Michel and Simon show us that the landscape too is a garden, made up of ecological relationships and human processes. What is remarkable about the ENSP Versailles is that the laboratory for this action in the landscape is a garden, and a garden that needs tending, always.

When landscape architects introduce themselves to new acquaintances their job title generally confuses people and they ask, 'So, can you design my garden?' Landscape architects sigh and explain they do big landscapes too: suburbs, cities, etc. But a visit to the Potager shows us that the large is in the small. It reinforces the value of the garden in its broadest sense. In our gardens we can learn things that have very little to do with gardening and much to do with people, with nature, with history, and, in noticing the weeds that should have, or need to be, pulled out, with ourselves. [•]

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