

Continuity in Landscape - West and East

Wybe Kuitert

Text of presentation held at the Symposium **Gardens and their Environmental Context** for the Cultural Heritage Protection Cooperation Office, Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU), Nara Prefecture Hall, January 17, 2004

The landscape in which we live has become an environment of science, technology and economy. As reminders of a different time and space, we cherish our historic gardens as memory-islands of a paradisiacal, man-made harmony with nature. Having become monuments we easily forget that once they were part of a more continuous landscape. Continuity in human activity over time and space fixed the gardens harmoniously not only in the occupation patterns of a wider landscape. Also the appreciation of the gardens was a continuous extension of man's sensual and sensitive appreciation of his landscape.

Giving some examples, I will try to distill a lesson to learn from the past, adding some general suggestions intended to restore, at least partly a little of the continuity in some historic gardens in the west and the east, more precisely in Holland and Japan, two countries with which I am most familiar.

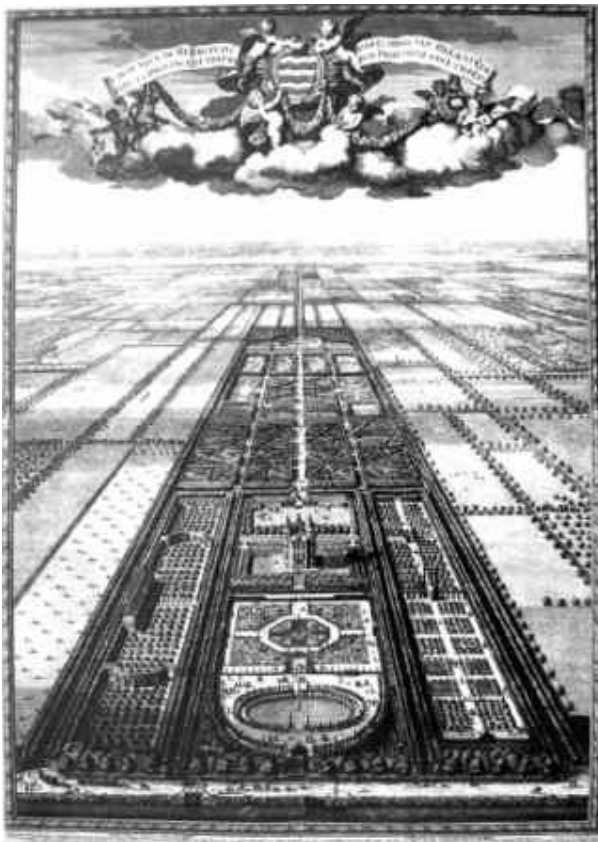


Fig. 1 Bird-eye perspective of the garden and surrounding landscape of Heemstede (Stoopendaal, De Moucheron 1700-1702)

Seventeenth century Dutch gardens of the ruling princes and regents are sometimes shown in a glorious bird-eye perspective. Looking more in detail these illustrations show us how the intensity of human labor decreased with the increasing distance from the main house. Most work was required for the parts of the garden close to the house; the further away, the more was left to nature.

In front of the house we find the French style flower bed, with the espalier fruit garden around it. It had the finest varieties of French pears.



Fig. 2 Apples and pears grown in the front garden; decorative flower beds are seen in front of the house (De Nieuwe en Naaukeurige Neederlandsche Hovenier, 1713)

Then we find the plantings of dwarf apple trees that could be maintained without laborious transport of ladders. In between are sections of the garden that have herb and vegetable fields. Running through the whole arrangement we find wide, sanded alleys planted with trees. Woods, maintained with forestry methods provided timber. Further away we see the farmland, sometimes with tame deer, but mostly with the farmer's cows for milk and cheese. The most remote distance shows a seemingly untouched nature, a wilderness, usually an undulating land of sloping hillsides. It is said that the wilderness showed in its contrast to the geometrical arrangement that the owner controlled his estate as a king his country. But actually also the "wild" nature was controlled by man. The hilly heath-lands were basically the fields to herd the sheep. The sheep that once again provided profit from the land in form of wool and meat. In a nice spatial arrangement of intensity of human labor we see the ideal landscape depicted as a continuous arrangement of profit taken from the land. There is no severe disruption

or sudden ecological barrier.

Turning to the appreciation of this landscape, we see a continuity of a different dimension. We have to turn to our five senses.

It is the eye and sometimes the nose that are enjoyed close to the house with the colorful arrangement of (fragrant) flowers in the French beds. Close-by the trained espalier attracts the eye as does the beauty of the fruits grown. Most remarkable though is the fine taste of the French pears that in Holland reach an optimum of their aroma along the brick walls. It brought a rare and southern flavour to the misty landscapes of Dutch autumn. Poems glorifying life on the Dutch estate laud the Rousselet, the Cuisse Madame, or the Gutedel grapes, etc. The aroma of musk and bergamot are noticeable appreciations of a glorious harvest season in autumn. The apples further away were mostly meant for sale, or were otherwise to be enjoyed in the course of winter when they were reaching their utmost sweetness on the shelves in the cellar of the house, either slowly ripening, or otherwise peeled and dried.

Walking along the alleys planted with lime trees was another enjoyment. In spring the heavy, sweet smell of lime blossom is almost intoxicating. It is from earlier ages on associated with merrymaking and love. In mid summer the cool air under the dome-like crowns of linden is again appreciated in particular. The Dutch variety of lime became so well known as a pleasant and elegant planting material that it was exported to other European countries, for instance to England and Sweden. The most remote and wild nature with the shepherd and his sheep, served to assure that the kingly level of appreciation was well elevated above the wild and the barbarian. Understood as a contrast, it formed a necessary, and complementary part of a continuity in appreciation; it was appreciated for horse riding and hunting as well. In the course of the seasons we find various appreciations relying on various of our five human senses throughout various sections of the garden. There is an intricate, but self-evident continuity in time, space, and sensual appreciation. The appreciation of the garden through the taste on the tongue, the fragrances in the nose, the feeling of the cool air in summer, etc. is expressed in typical poetry of the time (hofdichten).

Almost at the same time in the history of mankind we find in China and Japan a similar continuity in time, space and appreciation of the garden. It centers around the concept of *Shakkei*, borrowed scenery.

The theory of borrowing scenery for the garden comes to the written sources with Yuanye (1634). Its writer Wufou, or Li Ji Cheng had supervised the construction of various gardens, for which he was appreciated among his friends. He had seen the landscape of China on his travels and was able to put it all together in a consistent text. He combines the elementary consciousness of landscape, the genius of garden creation and on top of that he has a poetic sensibility.

At the start, and at the end of the Yuanye we find profound lessons on the garden under the concept of borrowing the scenery. It starts at the first stage of garden planning when elements outside the garden are surveyed and should be taken to form part of the scheme to enrich the garden. There should be a continuity in time and space by appropriating outside scenery. The meaning of "scenery" is not narrow-minded with Ji Cheng. Whether it be the garden scenery of neighbors, the sound of sutra-reading monks in a nearby temple, swallows carried on the early summer air, etc., etc., it is all scenery intended to connect time and space; and the trick is to borrow or appropriate it. Thus you come to stand into contact with the ever evolving cycles of the day, of the

seasons, of time. One can not but be impressed by the richness of perception found in the landscape, as proposed in Yuanye. The text has much more to offer than I can explain here, also my own understanding is limited *).

In history, only shortly after Ji Cheng we find this technique of garden design expressed in some borrowed scenery gardens in Japan. Speculating on some of these seventeenth century gardens gives us enough food for thought to justify a short presentation here.

The garden of Entsu-ji (Kyoto) was part of a countryside setting appreciated by the seventeenth-century elite of the Imperial Court in Kyoto. Personally, I had a chance to spend several days in Entsu-ji in different seasons. The poetic appreciation of this garden is greatly enlarged exactly because of the borrowing of a view on the nearby mountain Hiei. One sees the autumn colors on the slopes of Hiei, pointing to an omnipresent cycle of the seasons when the maples turn red in the garden. The priest rakes the fallen leaves and the smell of the fire that burns them adds on to the appreciation in our mind. In early summer the mountain is steaming with mists after a heavy rain, whereas the air is earthy and humid in the garden. Summer gives a cool breeze with the rustling sound of the bamboo, just outside the garden whereas the mountain shows itself in tones more dimly.

Shugakuin Villa (Kyoto) came about in the same cultural setting. Again, it heavily relies on appreciating the time and space quality of the wider landscape. It borrows a landscape to the extent that it even includes the rice fields and the narrow paths where the farmers cross the scenery to maintain the fields. One sees the yearly cycle of the agricultural work that concords with the evolving seasons of the garden landscape.



Fig. 3 Rice fields in the borrowed scenery of Shugaku-in, Kyoto (photo by author, september 1985)

The garden was used as a base to depart for season-related excursions, like outings to gather mushrooms in autumn, or horsetails in spring. Prepared as dishes the taste added to the joy of the season. A similar sight over the farmland was had in former days from the Shoiken tea house in the Katsura Villa, that in architecture resembles a farm house along the roadside, rather than a typical "tea ceremony" house for receiving guests.

Shisendo (Kyoto) still makes it possible to imagine how it once borrowed the scenery of the city, while overlooking a lower part of the garden. In this lower part vegetables were grown in earlier history. The founder of Shisendo was well versed in classic Chinese poetry of the Tang period, and admired poets like Bai Juyi or Tang Yuanming, who wrote on the joys of appreciating the countryside landscape living in a small retreat. Regretfully the vegetable garden was changed to an aesthetic garden, and the site is now too crowded with trees to see the city.

Jiko-in (Nara) still suggests how one could see the plain, with the city of Nara in the distance, and village children fishing in the river that runs just in front of the garden. One could see the expected visitors approaching the place, see them cross the river and the fields, warning the host that preparations for a proper welcome should be done by now. In the course of the seasons the color of the plain would change from brown grey in winter, into fresh and verdant green of spring, and finally to the gold of the rice fields in the harvest season. The main hall that holds the most important room to receive guests is again modelled to resemble a farm house. Contemporary poetry in Chinese appreciates the garden on time and space in its borrowed scenery.



Fig. 4 From the hall of Jiko-in one overlooks the plain of Nara over the low hedge that lines the garden. (Photo by author, May 1984)

The gardens, either in Holland or in Japan, discussed above were all high in quality. They were developed by an elite that was well aware of the perceptiveness of man towards the innate qualities of the natural world in the garden. It was expressed in poetry. Whether we speak about pears or rice, about lime blossom fragrance or mushrooms, the continuity is the same. The garden landscape and its appreciation did

not end at the boundaries of the garden as is clear from poetry and it did not end with a simple visual appreciation.

Now, in 2004, one can only be sad seeing a bus load of tourists that come to see their sight, take their pictures, and go home. Satisfied? Is this all a historic garden has to offer? Can't we do a little more to make the meaning of the garden better understood?

A good example are the efforts made in Jiko-in. Visitors are asked to sit down in front of the garden and are offered a cup of tea and sweets. This simple action pins the visitor to the appreciation. Sit down and look. Inhale, taste, appreciate! Jiko-in, in spite of the advancing hectic of our modern world, has managed to continue presenting the garden together with most of its original appreciation. Even more, what used to be an elite experience has become an appreciation of nature accessible to just anyone who pays the entrance fee. Jiko-in makes clear what the garden was meant for. It makes us feel at comfort with all our five senses that appreciate the garden with its borrowed scenery: it brings us the continuity of landscape, of time and of space.



Fig. 5 At Jiko-in the borrowed scenery lost most of its meaning, after rice fields were lost to the expanding urbanization. To mitigate the loss, the temple management bought land in front of the garden and planted large trees as a camouflage. (Photo by author, 25/5, 1984).

The example is so clear that it's not difficult to see what the lesson should be to improve any effort of preserving a historic garden. On the level of town and country planning we should make efforts to work on a more continuous land use planning around the historic gardens, to preserve more of the original idea. We must enlarge the islands, allow the gardeners to occupy the land around. They should for example, be able to grow rice, or apple trees in the traditional way. Then, as for composition, the rice or

apple fields should be made part of the garden and should be enjoyed by the visitors, and not only visually: we should offer them rice or apple wine.

If we could only transmit a little more of the original continuity in landscape to our modern visitors, the better, the easier gardens are understood. Rice and apple wine, a cool walk under the lime trees, it is all easy to appreciate, of all times and all cultures. The more of the past we can make part of the present, the better gardens are understood and understanding is in the interest of preservation.

*) For my notes on Yuanye I acknowledge the help of professor Che Bing CHIU in Paris and strongly recommend his annotated translation "Yuanye, le traite du jardin (1634)", Besancon, 1997

See also:

<http://www.nara.accu.or.jp/>

<http://www.nara.accu.or.jp/about/conference/2003.html>