

Hage, Ralph. Louis the XIVth and Zoen at the Origins of Modernity: Reflections on Two Options of Landscape Design

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Abstract

Gardens are at the limits between nature and culture, a product of the cumulatively acquired technical skills through which humans materially engaged with nature; a place where different civilizations conversed with their environment and expressed the symbolisms and ideologies underlying their engagement with it. They have reflected varied and sometimes contradictory ideas; man’s fall from grace, Epicureans frugality and contentment, Zen’s experiential merger with the flux of nature as well as royal absolutism and its illusions of control over the chaos of a misbehaving nature. From political disengagement to expressions of authoritarianism; the Garden’s complexities reflects those of the civilizations that produced it, expressing their coherences and incoherencies, their search for beauty, meaning and even their practices of coercion. Such conflicting ideas are found in comparing writings of Louis the XIVth regarding the gardens of Versailles and those of the Monk Zoen regarding Japanese gardens. The ideas underlying these two texts are still urgently debated today as they structure the conflictual discourses between industrial modernity and environmentalism.

Key Words: Louis XIVth, Zoen, French, Japanese, Garden, Industrialization, Environment, Energy, Modernity, Civilization.

Of the myriad revolutionary aspects of Modernity two are fundamental; energy capture and standardization. The importance of the energy revolution was shown by Thomas Homer Dixon (2008), who

highlighted how all pre-industrial civilizations largely functioned on solar energy. This apparently startling idea is rather self-evident: the energy of the sun allows for photosynthesis, which allows for plant growth, that feeds humans and animals, who transform solar into muscular energy. Humans then go on to use muscular energy to build roads or monuments such as the Coliseum and Baalbeck.

As all pre-industrial societies were limited in their growth by the amount of energy that they could extract from the sun using agriculture, their most efficient means of energy capture, this also limited the effect that they could have on the environment, (by no means negligible as the Romans deforested large parts of Europe Asian and Africa in their search for more land to cultivate).

On the other hand if we take our own civilization, one based on modern forms of energy such as gasoline, we see right away the difference in potential effects: three teaspoon of Gasoline contains the equivalent energy of 8 hours of human physical labor, thus a typical car tank might contain the equivalent of two years of labor (Dixon, 2008) meaning that It would have taken a roman two years to produce the same amount of work found in a common gas tanks. Such comparisons between the industrial and pre-industrial world goes a long way in explaining the extraordinary complexity of modern civilization, one based on our ability to harness the necessary energy to produce and maintain unprecedented social and technological complexity and to build the infrastructures and support the administrations necessary to run it.

But of course oil is captured solar energy; the result of photosynthesized organic materials accumulated over millions of years and transformed by pressures from the earth's crust. In the developed world the availability of this non-renewable material created a temporary illusion of being liberated from the energy constraints that humanity has faced throughout its pre-industrial history. The consequences of this are now starting to appear on a global scale: the energy-intensive agricultural revolution sustained a world-wide demographic explosion, that lead to extensive pollution and global warming, to instability and the near-collapse of infrastructures and social services in some countries such as Egypt, as well as a

potentially disastrous scarcity of water in Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria and China among numerous others (Pearce, 2006).

The other great revolution of modernity is the progressive standardization of the building blocks of material culture. This historical process has contributed enormously to the efficiency of the modern world and is one of the ubiquitous forces behind globalization. Simply put, such uniformisation is what allows a bolt manufactured in Japan to fit into a nut manufactured in France.

What I want to argue is that both these revolutionary aspects of modernity have as one of their points of origin the absolute monarchy of Louis the XIVth and that this is clearly expressed in the construction of Versailles and its gardens. On the other hand, a resistance to precisely such processes of uniformization and the use of energy to radically transform nature can be found in traditional Japanese Landscape design. In order to make these points I would like to compare two texts, one Japanese the other French:

The Japanese text is titled *Senzui narabi ni yagyo no zu* or *Illustrations for Designing Mountain, Water, and Hillside Field Landscapes* (in Zoen and Slawson, 1991) and is attributed to a priest by the name of Zoen. The dates of 1448 and 1466 contained in the manuscript tell us that it is from the Muromachi period of landscape gardens. The interest of this text lays in the presuppositions that structure its ideas and what they tell us about the way the Japanese conceived of the relationship between society, nature and gardens.

The text to which I am comparing Zoen's is titled *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles* or *Manners of Showing the Gardens of Versailles* and was written by Louis the XIVth himself. It describes the itineraries that must be taken when visiting the Palace's Gardens. There are six different versions with slight variances (Thacker, 1972). For convenience, we will be using the second version, arguably the most well organized.

Zoen opens with a warning: «If you have not received the oral transmissions, you must not make gardens». And this warning is repeated throughout the text, almost obsessively: Passage 28 : « There are oral transmissions. », Passage 32 : « There must be oral transmissions concerning this. ». Passage 34 « You must inquire thoroughly into the oral transmissions on such matters. » Passage 35 « There ought to be some oral transmissions on this matter. » (in Zoen and Slawson, 1991).

Why this insistence on oral transmission? One way of understanding it is to place it within the context of Japanese craftsmanship, frequently the work of Masters operating outside written culture. This has some fundamental consequences that are counter-intuitive to those living in scripto-centric cultures where exact transmission of knowledge is valorized.

If there is resistance to written transmission and suspicion towards illustration in Zoen's work, it is primarily because of the great legitimacy given to oral transmission in Japanese Culture. The advantage of oral tradition is in the very imperfection of its mode of transmission, meaning that the techniques, symbolisms and ideologies at the base of Japanese Gardens are subtle and capable of change and evolution *precisely because* their transmission is relatively inefficient. It is within the space of this inefficiency that the Japanese Gardner can innovate or refine what was transmitted to him.

But another important element can explain this resistance to written transmission: In the *Tsukiyama Teizoden*, (Making of Hill Gardens), written in the XVIth century, Soami, the author of the text insists that the Gardner must conceal his art so that his work appears to be natural (*Quoted in Yoon, 1994*). Thus, the Japanese Gardner must work with non-standardized elements; particular terrains whose very particularity must be preserved and re-expressed; unmodified rocks or trees only minimally altered with a view of respecting and enhancing their original form.

Within Japanese tradition there are strict limits to the modifications a Gardner can impose on nature. Thus when speaking of the recreation of valleys and streams in the Garden, Zoen writes: “You should simply make the stream valley ever so gently rolling *and utterly ordinary.*” (Italic added). In other

words never do anything that nature is incapable of doing. Writing and precise illustrations, in their too-perfect transmission of knowledge that can resist modification, can impose a rigid order not adapted to the infinite varieties of non-uniform building elements used by the Japanese Gardner. Writing can ossify what is flexible and give an impression of certainty where there is and where there should be none. The writing of Zoen treats elements of landscape design that are by their very nature individual.

Whereas the Japanese tradition of landscaping work within what is given, a site whose particularity is respected or a non-modified rock, the landscape architects of Louis the XIVth, such as André Le Nôtre, strive to impose geometric forms upon nature. In the Gardens of Versailles we see vegetation upon which Le Nôtre has imposed spiral forms that are themselves embedded within other simple geometric shapes, creating a global abstract organization. The logic of the gardens can only be seen from above or by looking at the landscape plans of Le Nôtre. This is when the overall geometrical logic, partially hidden from those within the garden, reveals itself fully. The garden is organized in relation to this bird's eye view, that of the architect and the sovereign looking from above. What it reveals is nature forcefully reduced to geometry and made to *obey* architectural plans; a triumph of the state over chaotic nature. Such forced obedience is a rhetorical expression of absolutism.

Starting with Brunelleschi and Alberti, the transcription of reality into geometrically precise drawings became an instrument of control: Linear perspective imposed the control of the architect over the building site by privileging pre-planning and a centralization of decisions over organic growth. More globally the advent of precise mapping techniques facilitated control of the state over its territories. The comprehensibility of the territory through the simplification and standardization of reality found in maps was one element in the increased control of modern states. The tendency of absolutism however is to go from description to prescription: from maps as comprehensible expressions of reality to reality made to obey maps and the necessities of comprehensibility. This is a radical but rational expression of the drive towards central control given that what is comprehensible is far more easily controllable.

To be sure, there is great difference between a truly absolutist state and the rhetoric of absolutism. Louis the XIVth had to contend with great limitation to his power. But his weakness is precisely what explains grandiose absolutist rhetoric such as the Gardens of Versailles. The theatrical and symbolic representation of state control over a standardized and obedient nature was made possible by the availability of enormous energy resources to the king, namely the thousands of workers under his command.

The estimates for the cost of Versailles vary enormously, but what is certain is that the project was extraordinarily expensive, necessitating extensive reorganization of French manufacturing. Money is fundamentally a symbol of the energy available to a given society (Dixon, 2008). The pre-industrial French society of the XVIIth and early XVIIIth century, which was still limited by the availability of solar energy captured through agriculture, was made to invest an enormous proportion of its energy-surplus into Versailles at a time when famine was a frequent occurrence. But France's pre-industrial limitations should not obscure the revolutionary nature of Louis the XIVth project, which announces our own modernity: Based on the geometric uniformization of natural elements, it prefigures the processes of standardization and industrialization underlying our own construction processes.

This architectural uniformization of building elements is situated within the context of a great absolutist project, which had as its main ambition, the rational simplification and standardization of the constitutive material and symbolic elements of the state in view of centralized control. Thus, it was during the period of Louis the XIVth that we see a strict application of the rules of classical theatre inspired from Aristotle's canon (Brown, 1977), centralized control over the arts through Academies (Isherwood, 1969). It was also during this period that we see the first European regular army since the Roman Empire with standard uniforms and equipments, as well as the general standardization of tax laws. These are but some of the aspect of the grand uniformization project undertaken by Louis the XIVth and his ministers. The objective was to simplify material and non-material culture in view of immediate comprehensibility facilitating increased control by the state.

This objective of absolute control seems absent in the text of Zoen, which reveals something quite remarkable about Japanese landscape design. Thus:

“12. There is an instruction that says you are not to change the position of a rock from what it was in the mountains. Placing a rock so that the part which was underneath in the mountains is on top is called "reversing the rock," and is to be avoided. To do this would anger the spirit of the rock and would bring bad luck.” (in Zoen and Slawson, 1991).

According to Zoen, the rock must be installed in the same position in which it was found; maintaining a continuity between the source and the new so that the rock is not symbolically separated from its origins. The search for the rock, its displacement, its reinstallation and contemplation are all part of a linked process to which a symbolic and ritual dimension is given:

“10. In the planting of trees and herbs, you make their natural habitats your model. You will not go astray so long as you bear in mind the principle of planting trees from deep mountains in the deep mountains of the garden, trees from hills and fields in the hills and fields, herbs and trees from freshwater shores on the freshwater shores, and herbs from the seashore on the seashore. For the landscape garden mirrors nature. And thus it is said that in each and all we must return to the two words, natural habitat.” (in Zoen and Slawson, 1991).

Traditional Japanese gardens of the are like echoes or counterpoints to nature; similar motifs are repeated, but spatially and temporally displaced in view of creating a symbolic polyphony. This polyphony also includes the social, since the garden not only expresses a view of nature but also social relationships reflective of the latter. The garden is then the link between the social and the natural. Thus, in the disposition of the so-called rocks of respect and affection, Zoen writes: “14. The Respect and Affection Stones are two stones set slightly apart with their brows inclined toward one another.” This

anthropomorphization of the rocks transforms them into both an expression of nature and of harmonious social relationships.

The esthetic of the garden is framed by the order of human relations and must consequently express a respect for hierarchy:

“22. (...) Do not position a rock in such a way that it has a sharp point sticking out in the direction of the position from which the master customarily faces the garden, no matter how fascinating the scenic effect.” (in Zoen and Slawson, 1991).

Zoen is clearly stating here the organization of the garden is limited by social etiquette and must demonstrate –in an animistic sense – a respect for hierarchical relationships. Thus he is positioning ethics as an organizing principle of aesthetics.

Whereas Zoen places the garden in symbolic continuity with its original habitat, Versailles is in radical discontinuity. In the text of Louis the XIVth, the processes of the construction of the site are emptied of narration and symbolism. The origins of the materials and plants are simply irrelevant as they are going to be transformed into uniform geometric shapes anyway. The text of Louis the XIVth concentrates on one aspect of the garden, that of an impersonally directed visit. Even the style of Louis the XIVth strongly reflects this impersonality; any indication of an author is avoided and the King use of the French pronoun “on”, denotes this impersonality, (imperfectly translated here with the English pronoun “one”):

“1. In leaving the castle through the vestibule one should go to the terrace and stop on the top of the stairs to consider the situation of the parterre, the water pieces and the fountains of the Cabinets (translation of the author) / En sortant du chateau par le vestibule de la Cour de marbre, on ira sur la terrasse ; il faut s’arrester sur le haut des

degrez pour considérer la situation des parterres des pièces d'eau et les fontaines des Cabinets. (MS2, in Thacker, 1972)”

The text consists almost exclusively of these impersonal orders. While we know that the king took particular delight in showing the gardens, which became the backdrop of numerous plays, ballets and concerts (Thacker, 1972), we cannot deduce from the text whom it is addressed to. The act of visiting is standardized and reproducible on every visit regardless of the subjectivity of the visitor and the narration produced by the visit to Versailles as it is deployed through the King's directives, does not contain any reference to its natural origins.

In its conception and execution Versailles is close to the way modern architects approach construction projects: an indifference to the origins of materials, an extreme modification of the terrain made possible by the availability of energy and centralized control over the processes of construction made possible by the use of architectural drawings and mapping.

With the modern advent of cheap energy such as oil and the scale of work that it allows, the construction practices of Louis the XIVth have been democratized. The capacity of the King to standardize nature using the muscular energy of thousands of workers is replaced by instruments of modern constructions, more consuming of energy and far more available.

On the other hand, Zoen represents the possibility of an alternative to the modernity announced by Versailles. Beyond the aesthetic superiority and visual sophistication of Japanese Gardens which Zoen represents, there is in his work elements that are strangely compatible with contemporary environmentalism: an awareness of the origins of material, the use of natural elements such as trees in environment corresponding to their source of origin, an approach structured by the ordinary as opposed to the ostentatious, an esthetic obeying ethics and a desire to replicate nature as opposed to dominating it.

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