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Charles Moore and William Mitchell

When Francis Bacon wrote, in 1625, that “when Ages grow to Civility and Elegancie, Men come to Build Stately, sooner than to Garden Finely,” the Pilgrim fathers had been struggling for just four years with the wild and recalcitrant North American continent. The hardships and perils of the frontier (as well as its thrills and challenges) that were to shape the relationship of Americans to their gardens for the ensuing 350 years have pressed us seldom into full great gardens like those of Europe and of Asia and often into miniatures, extensions, fragments, and inversions of those works, suitable for a nation in motion.

It is curious but not really surprising that the American garden that bears the closest resemblance to the great European ones is Middleton Place, near Charleston, South Carolina, of 1670, which is also the first major American garden. The interment of the deceased provided the first major opportunity, much later on, for a landscaped area available to the public. Frederick Law Olmsted’s Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston, which dates from 1831, should probably be regarded as the continent’s oldest landscaped public garden, although many major

private gardens (from Middleton Place on) and certainly many grassy public spaces of importance (Battery Park in New York City, the Boston Common, Jackson Square in New Orleans) antedate it by a century or more. For a brilliant half-century after Mount Auburn Cemetery opened, Olmsted and others created the grand gardens of democracy: public parks such as Central Park in New York, Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, the Fenway in Boston, college campuses such as Stanford University’s on the San Francisco peninsula, even garden subdivisions such as Roland Park in Baltimore. These new garden forms for public use sometimes contained ingenious new arrangements to serve large groups of people: Central Park is particularly remarkable for the manipulation of hills and tunnels that separated vehicular traffic (carriages then, automobiles since) from pedestrian and equestrian circulation.

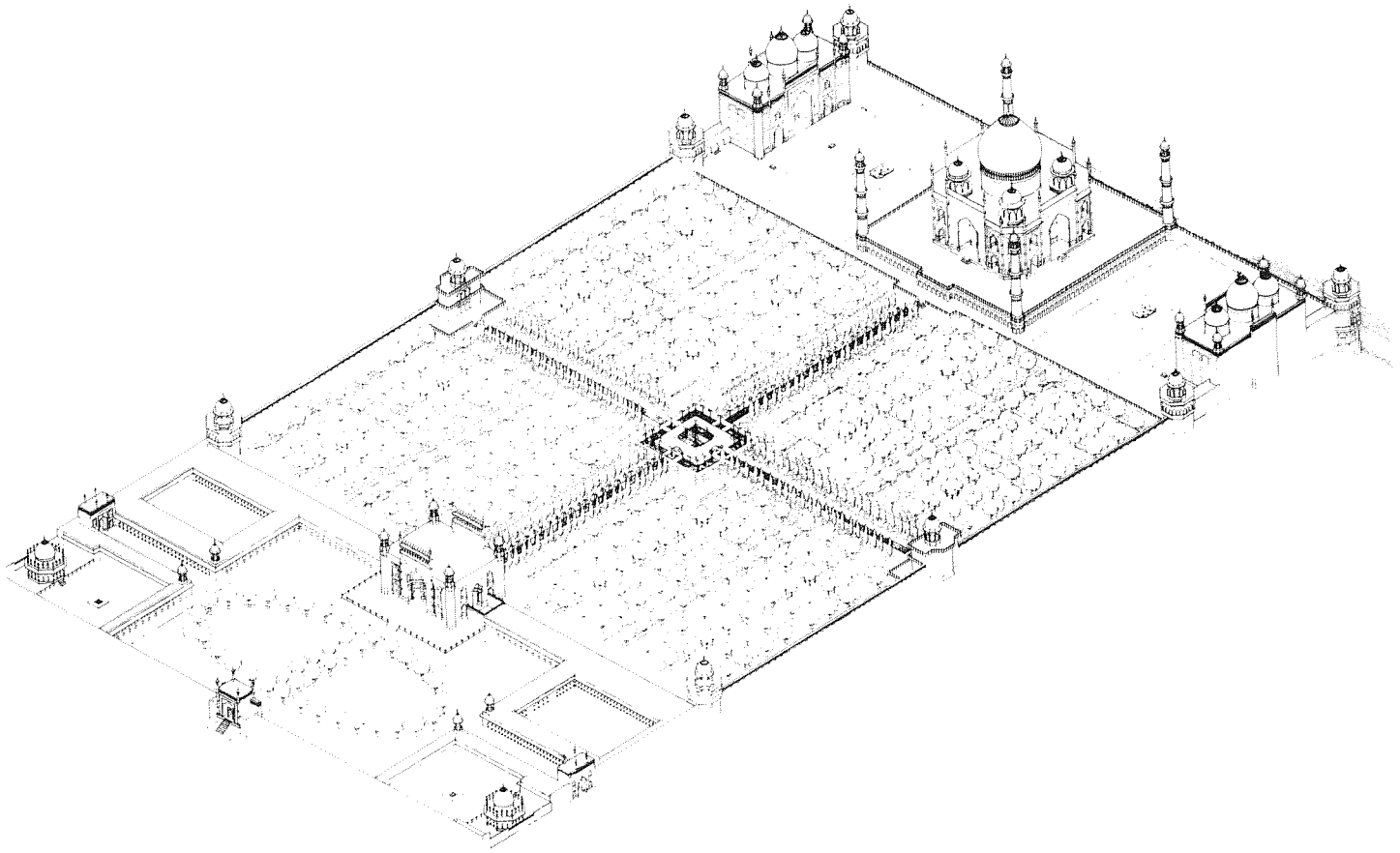
The citizens of cities that have mushroomed in the twentieth century have shown less inclination to invest their resources in public gardens. Perhaps it can be argued that the loose texture of the cities of the automobile age has allowed many citizens gardens of their own, so that the public green space lost many of its more intimate functions, although it did retain an important visual one, which small private gardens couldn’t do so well: it could recall the natural landscape, as the spreading cities rendered that more and more re-

mote. There are, though, some bargains available to bodies politic who just want their green space to look at. One of them, recognized since the landscaping of Mount Auburn Cemetery, is the burial ground, brought to an even greater semblance of park likeness by the removal of headstones, as at Forest Lawn near Los Angeles.

Mediterranean houses have always claimed some private turf by surrounding it with a building or a wall, and this tradition came directly from Spain to Mexico. In towns like Oaxaca, it creates a texture of continuous street facades, broken by half-observed glimpses into shaded family courts. When the courtyard came further north, in the California missions, it became a device for organizing many dwellings around a much larger communal space. Later, in California, there were bungalow courts on suburban lots patterned in the same way.

From almost the beginning, though, North America has bred an opposite tradition, which replaced walls with open spaces as a device for establishing a property. The settlers in eastern North America built no walls but left open space around their freestanding buildings; the larger the distance from the house to the street and to the sides and rear of its property, the more important the house. Public (but not commercial) structures were likely to be given more generous dimensions still, so that a court-house might sit in the center of

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a block, a “courthouse square,” surrounded, like the houses, by landscaping.

Here, around the courthouse and the houses, the purpose of the planting that was introduced became not to make an inhabitable garden but to adorn the house, even to camouflage it a little. From this derives the curious American institution of foundation planting, inserted to soften or even to mask the unsightly masonry foundation of the house. The combination of overzealous planting and uncontrolled growth has enveloped many a house in its bushes and given the institution a bad name, although the right combination of house and planting can produce, for instance, the rose-covered cottage that so delights us.

Sometimes the planting in front of or around the house is confined in a “planter,” which might even become a featured part of the design of the facade. The confinement it provides discourages the uncontrolled growth of the plants inside. However, it is unlikely that the plants inside will be able to grow big enough to have any part of providing an environment outdoors in the noble tradition of the gardens we have looked at, which are inhabitable by the human body, or by our minds, which let us imagine ourselves in the garden (like we can imagine ourselves in Ryoan-ji, although we never set foot in it).

The American custom, since firmly written into local law, decrees that the house be somewhere in the

The Taj Mahal

Drawing by William Turnbull Jr.

middle of its site, with the surrounding property divided into 1) an enclosed front yard, a foreground for the house, visible to the neighbors, with lawn, “accent” trees or shrubs, and foundation planting; 2) side yards, separating the house from its neighbors; and 3) a backyard, traditionally devoted to service and more recently to parking cars. This arrangement does not actively encourage the making of gardens.

Bigger Patterns

The orderly layout of the wilderness and the transformation of useless lands into useful ones are two recurrent American themes that have paralleled, and to some extent happened instead of, the ordering of the land in private and public gardens. In the century before the Pilgrim fathers, even the mighty Babur couldn't bring order and symmetry and running water to very much territory (his Ram Bagh encloses just a few acres of ground), but nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans have done it by the thousands of square miles. Is it too fanciful to see the whole state of Indiana as a gigantic *bagh*, laid out on a recursive grid, varied only where collisions with natural landscape features mandated it? There is a grid of counties within which were gridded 36 square-mile townships, within which were 640 acre, mile-square sections, within which, finally, lay the basic 160-acre quarter-section farms. Nearby is the street grid of Chicago, with numbered streets running east-west into the lake, great avenues with

evocative names such as Prairie and Wabash running north-to-south for enormous distances, and the densely-packed rectangle of the Loop at the center, all broken open at the lake shore and the river. Far to the east is the two-way numbered grid of Manhattan, to the south is the symmetry of Savannah, and in the west rectangular city grids spread across valley floors until they bang into the surrounding mountains and wriggle up the slopes.

Babur had very little water to work with, so his wells, canals, *chadars*, and squares of irrigated land form a pattern that can be surveyed at a glance. In America the wells have become huge reservoirs, the canals have become aqueducts hundreds of miles long, the *chadars* have become awesome outflows (such as that at Boulder Dam), and the patches of irrigated land have become whole valleys so that the patterns of water can only be appreciated from a transcontinental jet. Sometimes there is symmetrical geometry still: large circles are overlaid, now, on the midwestern American grid, shaped by irrigating pipes that spin around water sources. They are the opposite of the contoured rice paddies that animate the hillsides of Asia in detailed and intimate response to the shape of the hills on which they lie very flat. The American circles, as long as the wheeled irrigation pipes can make their sweep about the central source, can go uphill and down, making a pattern quite independent of the contours and not even feeling the need to fill in the corners of the square fields left

brown and dry outside the circles of irrigation.

Even the mountains have become the base for patterns made by the big machines. In some of the rugged canyons in the hills behind Los Angeles, an extraordinary operation using huge earthmoving machines has sliced off the top of the steep hills to acquire dirt to mix with huge quantities of garbage to make a sanitary landfill that fills the canyons and supports on the spongy surface a golf course, dotted with pipes to vent the explosive methane that is brewing underneath. At the rim of the flat-topped new hills, the still solid earth supports a sinuous row of very expensive new condominiums, tight together on their sides and open at their fronts onto the golf course below in the valley. It is a brand new and highly profitable synthetic green landscape that bears almost no relationship in shape or color to the brown hills that were there before.

Faster Pilgrimages

An important inheritance from our national pioneering past is an interest not so much in arrival as in movement. Many of the most vivid images we shape are not of places but of routes, such as the Oregon Trail and the Santa Fe Trail, and events along the trail, such as the Cumberland Gap, the Mississippi River, or the Boston Post Road. Even the commercial strip of the very recent past stretches itself along the highway with little attention to place or arrival.

The emphasis on movement instead of settling down diminishes, of course, the ease with which we can inhabit our outdoor spaces. The difficulty is compounded by the size of the spaces: many American places seem too big (like the Grand Canyon) to encourage a sense of comfortable belonging.

The class of American gardens that comes closest to matching our continent's natural wonders is the garden for the automobile: the parkway or the scenic highway. In the successful ones, woods and meadows and copses and hedgerows and swamps and lakes, even the occasional great tree, are big enough to be seen from the window of a speeding automobile and are arranged to make a coherent event of the automobile's pilgrimage through them. The Northway out of Albany, New York, has won prizes for its beauty. The Taconic Parkway in New York, in gentler territory, is renowned as well, as are the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut. Among scores of other remarkable examples is the scenic highway in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which bores through a range of hills for repeated tunnel vistas of the four huge American presidential stone faces on Mount Rushmore, especially dramatic when they are lighted at night.

Freeway interchanges are among our most impressive national monuments. There is a four-level interchange just north of downtown Los Angeles that has become over the last few decades, as its vines

and trees have grown, a high-speed subtropical paradise. Theme parks, such as Disneyland, consist not of places but of rides: horizontal, vertical, circular, and over "ascents and declivities" that certainly would have startled Edmund Burke. Airports are among our largest and certainly most heavily frequented public buildings—starting points for pilgrimages that arrange the scenery of a continent into a square of a few hours (with movies interspersed, not tales, as in Chaucer's day). But the high-speed pilgrimage that now captures the imagination more than any other, surely, is that of the space shuttle—beginning with fire in Florida, around the world in minutes, with oceans and continents wheeling beneath, to arrival at a desolate lake bed in the desert.

Newer Collections

Variety in the landscape (like the uniqueness of Yosemite or the Grand Canyon) is a highly prized American virtue. Southern California, especially, is known for its dazzling variety of very different landscape elements jostling one another. In the days before air travel made it commonplace, high drama was seen in the opportunity to take a cog railway up to a snowy mountaintop in the morning, to picnic at noon in an orange grove, then to spend the afternoon at the beach. Roses and flowering vines of prodigious dimensions flourished. The movie industry located there, it is said, for the rich palette of backgrounds, used only by a few but visible to many as a richly varied landscape. Many refugees

from midwestern winters moved there, too.

Visitors to California from wintry states have always been astonished by luxuriant winter bloom in parks and gardens and have discovered establishments like Rogers Gardens, with its staggering collections of flowering plants set up for sale. In a curious inversion of a typical pilgrimage ritual, where the pilgrim might expect to bring an offering to the special place, Rogers Gardens affords the opportunity to take an offering away and leave money.

One comfortable aspect of taking away an offering is that *buying* something is *doing* something, and it is probably accurate to note that Americans are happiest in our gardens and landscapes when we are doing something: barbecuing or swimming or drinking or answering the phone at poolside or driving a golf ball or a fast car. Even the *visible* opportunity to do something is important to us; it matters less whether we actually do it: it is a safe bet that our yards contain more swimming pools than swimmers, and if we could figure out how to transform our lawns into tennis courts without rendering them impassable, tennis courts might line every street.

Golf courses are collections of nine or eighteen pieces. They were not invented in North America—they began in Scotland—but they flourish here as a particularly attractive feature of the landscape, partly, one suspects, because the rather elaborate rules for their layout provide a disciplined formal

structure that ensures a certain amount of order and variety in their design. The smooth greens come in sequence, with grassy airways, rough meadows, sand traps, hills, and woods arranged to keep the player (and often the viewer) surprised and intrigued.

One problem with a collection (though not a great one, we suppose, for Hadrian, or Ch'ien Lung, or even Vita Sackville-West) is figuring out how to pay for the acquisitions. William Randolph Hearst (who collected his treasures and fantasies at San Simeon), and J. Paul Getty (with his reconstructed Pompeiian villa/museum, garden, and art collection overlooking the shore at Malibu), and Henry E. Huntington (who made a collection of roses, another of camellias, and a stunning one of cacti around his mansion near Pasadena) all did it in the obvious way: by amassing immense wealth first. Other Americans have found more surprising methods. The proprietors of Rogers Gardens sell the pieces and replace them with more. The collections of carefully constructed landscape settings, statuary, and even complete buildings at Forest Lawn are financed by selling burial plots (and that results in a collection of another kind). Tax deductions make possible the collections of gentlemen's farms in the environs of Baltimore and other cities, where rolling fields and cows and hedgerows maintained by people in high tax brackets are encouraged for the visual pleasure they give the rest of us. Walt Disney simply charged admission.

Simpler Settings

It isn't clear whether it is the extraordinary variety of natural landscapes in North America or the relative paucity of grand man-made gardens, but American attention to the landscape seems mostly to have been focused on natural wonders unchanged by the hand of man, big enough and empty enough of humankind to allow the viewer to imagine himself the first non-native ever to look upon them, as someone in fact had been not long before. Unique landscapes especially caught the national imagination: the Everglades, the Grand Canyon, the Tetons, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Monument Valley. They achieved what the artist aspired toward, beyond what most gardeners dared aspire: they were monumentally themselves and altogether unlike any place else on earth.

It may have been that the effect of this interest in unbeatable natural wonders was to push American gardens out of the competition and to cause them often to be very simple. A memorable example is the front lawn for the Breakers, the enormous Vanderbilt mansion at Newport, Rhode Island, built by 1895. It is a summer place by the seaside, though it is huge and formal. On the oceanside is a terrace, a few steps, and then an unbroken lawn to the edge of the cliff where the ocean starts. Just a lawn. It is hard to imagine a European house of comparable splendor that wouldn't have sported a much more elaborate garden. Yet on that site

the lawn is a wonder, suggesting in its simple sweep a compass that seems to extend on across the Atlantic to Spain.

Two of America's most memorable settings, in fact, never actually appeared outdoors but remained within the covers of books. They are Edgar Allen Poe's unforgettable descriptions of a domestically scaled but ethereally beautiful setting, more natural than devised, in a little valley in upstate New York, and the grander and more splendid Domain of Arnheim. True to its American source, the latter was far from any city and was meant to be enjoyed as a route. The description stops, in fact, just short of the gates to what we expected might be the goal of the journey and concentrates entirely on a river along which we glide through a natural landscape whose only veiled suggestion of the hand of man is an eerily unnatural perfection. There is not a pebble in the crystal clear water whose shape is not perfect, not a dead limb or a fallen branch upon the unblemished mossy banks. It might have been our North American garden among our great gardens, but we didn't trust ourselves to draw it. Certainly it would have been a perfect garden to serve a country that adored youth and couldn't face death.