

## Landscape Projects in France

### *From garden design to landscape governance of territories*

Pierre DONADIEU | professor emeritus of Landscape sciences at *École nationale supérieure de paysage de Versailles-Marseille*

Landscape projects have become the favourite tool of landscape architects just like architectural projects are for architects, engineering projects for engineers and urban planning projects for urban planners.

The history of landscape projects in France is different from that of other European countries excepting Portugal whose landscape design history is quite similar.

It is based on notions of garden and landscape, which are the expression of the culture of a country, to convey multiple interpretations of their ideal relationships to the world. I will show how in France in over a hundred years the concept of places thus created has changed due to urban or territorial public policies taking charge of the quality of life of its inhabitants.

This history has gone through 5 successive stages over the last 150 years.

#### **1\_The garden project**

Garden and park design contains the idea of landscape design. It is based on creating a place for dreaming and imagination. It is conceived to impress upon all the human senses (visual, audible and olfactive aesthetics) so as to live better in polluted cities (hygienism) and, for the *jardin d'apparat*, to symbolize public or private power. This heritage is essential to understanding the evolution of French landscape designer practices.

The historical foundation of garden design has given rise to many works by historians and garden historians, as well as philosophers. At Versailles until the 1970s, the teaching of the history of gardens transmitted the culture of garden art as much as its techniques, characters, styles and ideologies throughout the world, and this had been so since its foundation in 1873. This historiographical tradition persists still at the landscape school of Versailles but its importance has considerably diminished at other schools because knowing how to design a garden or a park is often no longer at the center of learning nor is it an essential competence to access contemporary public markets - even when designers recognize their debt towards illustrious predecessors such as André Le Nôtre, Frederik Law Olmsted or Geoffrey Jellicoe.

During the Second Empire, reference to the art of the architect and gardener was maintained in projects through the knowledge of engineers (at Ponts-et-Chaussées). This was the case in Paris with engineer Adolphe Alphand who directed the Service des Promenades et Plantations de Paris. His administration (1856-1891) oversaw the creation of the parks of Buttes-Chaumont and Montsouris, the Bois de Boulogne and Bois de Vincennes and dozens of squares in every quartier of the French capital.

The fact of landscape architects working in tandem with urban planners was later inaugurated in colonial cities like Rabat in Morocco with Henri Prost and Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier. The idea of landscape design in urban planning is therefore not recent although it had been forgotten until the 1970s.

## **2\_The major turning point in French landscape design (1946-1982)**

The landscape design project was born in France in 1946 with the creation of the Landscape and Garden Art Department at Versailles alongside the National Horticulture School training horticultural engineers. After the war, reconstruction policies for cities and the housing of newcomers from the rural exodus involved architects and urban planners, but also landscape architects of whom there were very few at the time and whose job was often confused with that of entrepreneurs, horticulturists and nurserymen.

Despite this, during their two years of training, the new graduates – from 1947 to 1974 – learned about urban design with landscape architects and urban planning architects. They were asked to design the outdoor spaces of collective housing (called *Grands ensembles d'habitation*) and tourist town landscapes on the coast. Some of them obtained urban planning diplomas in France or abroad.

This new geographic scale of design, which was called « *paysage d'aménagement* » or « *grand paysage* », was no longer concerned with private gardens or public parks but rather the landscape of a territory which might be periurban, rural or natural, often ancient landscapes perceived as being precious and threatened by urbanisation, industrial wastelands, the reorganization of agricultural lands and the amenities of the modern world.

Le *projet de paysage* (the landscape project), which was what it came to be known as, became complementary to urban planning, in other words, urban projects and territorial projects for settlements. Later on, it would even attempt to substitute urban planning entirely in the 2000s with international Manifestos on urban landscape planning.

At the end of thirty years of economic growth (from 1950 to 1980), the profession of landscape architect was not very organized in France; there were barely four hundred graduates in the mid '80s, and many fewer actually working in the field.

There was a renewal of the profession thanks to four *paysagistes*, two trained at Versailles in the Landscape department, Jacques Simon and Jacques Sgard, and two others who had trained in art in Paris: Michel Corajoud at the School of Decorative Arts and Bernard Lassus with the painter Fernand Léger.

During their work at the urban planning and architecture atelier in Paris, Corajoud learnt from Simon how to practice urban landscape design in a new way in response to mandates for public parks in new cities. The urban landscape project, inspired by the theories of Kevin Lynch, made open public spaces, free of buildings, with or without trees, one of the conditions for the social success of the urban fabric. Jacques Sgard, urban planner and landscape designer with Pierre Dauvergne, large scale landscape architect, insisted as much on the planning of a project's political process as on the landscape layout of open public spaces, called green spaces. And Bernard Lassus, *plasticien paysagiste*, rehabilitated imagination in projects, a heritage of garden art that had generally been forgotten by architects and urban planners.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the notion of landscape replaced that of gardens in public environmental policies. A national centre for study and research on landscape was created near

Versailles in 1972. Short-lived, it was replaced in 1976 by the National Higher School of Landscape of Versailles which took over its mission and that of the Landscape and Garden Art Department. Garden design occupied an increasingly more important place than that of landscape design at that school. And education in the history of gardens – those of the heirs of André le Nôtre as much as the landscape schools of the XIX and XX centuries – also established itself in the neighboring school of architecture housed in the ancient *Ecuries du Château*.

In 1982, the international contest for *Parc de la Villette* in Paris, won by the architect B. Tschumi, marked the end of orthodox landscape style and the emergence of the idea of parks as urban public cultural facilities.

So what did landscape design contribute to the idea of how to treat open spaces ?

### **3\_Projects of landscape, of territory, or of patrimony ?**

Academic research into the nature of landscape projects made a belated appearance in the landscape schools that were started from 1993 on (in Bordeaux, then Blois and Lille). However, it was also initiated starting that year at ENSP in Versailles as well as at the architecture school of Paris-la-Villette with Bernard Lassus and the orientalist geographer Augustin Berque.

My first research work with Michel Corajoud in 1995 was focused on the necessary distinction between the culture of architectural design (creator of constructed objects) and that of landscape design (creator of perceived relations through objects dislocated on a site). It revealed the amnesia of the « tabula rasa » of architects and urban planners. It also showed the importance of time in the iterative process of design: from the plan to commissioning and realization, new issues were generated regarding the management of resources and use of space leading to a revision of the original points of view. The idea of an *urbanisme culturaliste* being preferable to an *urbanisme progressiste* was developed in the training of landscape architects based on the publications (in 1965 and 1974) of the historian and philosopher Françoise Choay.

In 2001, a dossier « *Autour du projet* » was published by the architect and researcher Frédéric Pousin in the new journal (n°7) *Les carnets du paysage*. Taking a phenomenological reading of space, the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Boutinet underlined the importance of landscape architects' intentionality and subjectivity. And the landscape designer Denis Delbaere explained his ability to extract the landscape potential of a site, expand its limits and establish functional and tactile relations between its constituents.

Because, here again, it is necessary to distinguish between the landscape plan (which has operative and political aims) and the landscape project (half vague – half defined) gestating between designer/architect and client and, in the same way, to differentiate between the landscape or place (understood as human relations with a perceived and utilized space) and the land or territory (understood as lived-in spaces with a political and cultural history).

In the same issue, the philosopher Jean-Marc Besse developed the essential concept that the idea behind a landscape project is to construct a representation of a territory by describing it just as it is, often previously « not seen nor understood ». This invention of a landscape reveals what is already there. The project comes to this realization « abductively », i.e. through hypothesis without recourse to the logic of scientific proof. A landscape project is truly an exploration of « points of view » at every spatial scale, a production of graphic or audible reports, the truest and most convincing possible. Particularly if walking becomes the practice of

a designer's body moving in the space to be recognized - which makes it neither a project of territory (functional and political) nor one of patrimony, concerned with the transmission of historical heritage, except when the sites themselves become landscapes protected by law.

Thus were new landscape practices reinvented starting from the end of the 1990s by Michel Corajoud, Grand Prix for Urban Planning in 2003, by Michel Desvigne, with the concept of « intermediate natures » laying the ground for urbanisation, another name for the re-greening of the 1980s which led to a Grand Prix for Urban Planning in 2011 for his projects on the right bank of Bordeaux and to the west of Versailles (the University campus of Paris-Saclay) and also by Alexandre Chemetoff who, with his pilot plan for the isle of Nantes (in the 2000s), invented site revelation urbanisation for the installation of new activities.

At the time, at least a quarter of the territory in France was protected in one way or another (natural parks, natural reserves, urban heritage sites, national and regional conservation areas, urban zoning...). At the beginning of the 1990s, the state attempted to take charge of the quality of ordinary landscapes, those that were not worthy of protection against their destruction, or of prestigious urban projects of still very populated areas, whether in the city or in the country, that were often in a state of neglect.

#### **4\_Public landscape policies and projects (>1993) : the democratic territorial turning point**

The practice of landscape design, especially regarding urban areas and public spaces, took a new direction from the beginning of the 1980s to 1997 due to the Environment Ministry's Landscape Mission.

In 1993, a law for the protection and valorization of landscapes, among other things, provided for the establishment of landscape guidelines in regional parks, and the 1995 Barnier law established the need for public debate, like in French Vexin in 1996 for the regional natural park. At the same time, the Environment Ministry created landscape plans complementary to territory projects (in regional or intermunicipal natural parks). And following the geographer Y. Luginbühl's proposal to the same Ministry, regional or department landscape atlases were initiated in 1996. Lastly, photographic landscape observatories as tools to understand or recognize the evolution of landscapes and for public debate were set up (especially in regional parks) on the initiative of the Landscape Mission. In metropolitan areas like the Ile-de-France, it was the regional development schemes or territorial coherence schemes that were to encompass municipal land management policies (urbanisation, agricultural and natural areas protection, environmental risks....)

This considerable number of tools, whether regulated or not, changed landscape project practices and gave rise to new professional profiles even though the words « landscape planning » did not appear. The expression « landscape mediation » was used (to a degree) in France to designate the co-construction of landscapes by the parties involved in the territorial governance of a local political or social project, with or without landscape architects.

This project, today political and « *sociétal* », now equally implies natural and cultural patrimony conservation, economic dynamics, territorial identity and social participation. One of its aims is the pursuit of personal and collective well-being which depends upon the tactile and functional characteristics of the environment. The scale of work and action has changed. It has become the co-management of landscape and the *co-evolution* of its actors, a notion that I have borrowed from the founder of Italian territorialism, Alberto Magnaghi.

This type of action is particularly well managed in some municipalities for regional parks and in some groups. Its creation anticipated the legal contents of the European Landscape Convention signed in Florence in 2000 and ratified in France in 2006. It conserves the basic principles of a landscape project (nominate, listen, recognize, propose, meet, engage, accompany and evaluate where possible).

More than anything, it introduced change in landscape through the parties involved in the production of landscape and places, notably via the inhabitants living there and judging them. The turning point is democratic: landscape became a common, shared good, beyond the material limits of public and private goods. But public debate can be inclusive or exclusive and separate as much as unite the inhabitants of a territory.

### **5\_ The difficult environmental turning point (> 2010)**

Since the end of the 1970s and the 1976 law on the protection of nature, the political and scientific environmental ideas that developed in France made little progress in penetrating traditional landscape milieus. The introduction of environmental planning along the lines of *Design with nature* by the British landscape architect Ian McHarg failed at the beginning of the 1980s.

Actually, the practice of landscape design by landscape architects is much more culturally aligned with an architectural or fine art project than with scientific disciplines such as ecology, sociology or geography. Moreover, it tends to be practised by a freelance professional to the point that a great divide has come to exist between graduates of the Landscape Engineering School of Angers and the landscape designers and architects obtaining diplomas from the government (DPLG) at Versailles and at Bordeaux and Lille. The former tend to work mainly in territorial public services, the latter as self-employed professionals.

A ditch has also been dug with respect to certain northern European professional landscape schools that are more sensitive to environmental issues and social participation, which has perhaps favoured some attitudes of resistance like those of the School of Versailles that favors professional work creating gardens, places and landscape. This is evidenced by the publications *Fieldwork and On Site* published in 2006 and 2008 by the Landscape Architecture Europe Foundation. *Landscape design* was not to be confused with *landscape planning*.

It was only at the end of the 2000s that two laws (called Grenelle), mainly inspired by landscape environmental sciences, were passed and put into practice in France. Two laws that in particular set a policy of creating a Green and Blue framework in France according to the European Natura 2000 project of active biodiversity conservation. To this end, at the beginning of 2010 state services produced regional ecological coherence outlines founded on scientific ideas regarding environmental continuity and biodiversity reservoirs, which, however, have yet to be incorporated into any actual urban planning documents.

In this context, landscape projects by French *concepteur paysagistes* (the professional title adopted in 2016 by law to recuperate biodiversity, nature and landscapes) are still often far from actual public policy on biodiversity of the state, apart from those of a few militants. Because the actual engagement of a project depends solely on the interpretation of the designer and the management of public and private sites - which is still little known. However, project practices respond explicitly to other public roles like *Conseils de la maîtrise d'ouvrage*, wind power plans, public landscape plans and charters, or photographic landscape observatories, whose effects are not assessable, however, in the absence of methods put in place to this effect.

## 6\_The two poles of landscape projects

To conclude, I would like to mention the two poles of Landscape projects that have been shaped empirically over the last forty years by professionals in the field and were featured in recent publications by MétisPresses of research work by young landscape researchers : Sonia Keravel in 2015 (*Passeurs de paysages, le projet de paysage comme art relationnel*) and Alexis Pernet in 2014 (*Le grand paysage en projet*), as well as by Council of Europe work on the putting into practice of the European Landscape Convention (2017).

These two poles of design practice are that of the valorization of places and sites, and that of landscape governance of territorial projects.

There seem to be four non-exclusive ways for landscape architects to give meaning to a landscape project. The first three classically concern the scale of a site to be treated (an operational project for an open public space, for instance) ; the fourth concerns the scale of an territory inhabited by a community (public policy for the qualification of landscape to be defined and put in place according to the European Landscape Convention of Florence).

Sonia Keravel interprets the practice of a landscape architect as the art of transmission, passing from the creative intuition of the designer to the project and then its reception by the public.

The designer has several choices available.

**A tale.** The designer can tell a story that uses the site as support for an imaginary tale, for example, the *Jardin des retours* (of plants imported from North America to France) set up in the 1980s by the team of B. Lassus in the place of the ancient *Corderie royale* port in Rochefort which can be read as a metonymy of the features installed on the site: masts represent ships, Virginia tulip trees represent travelling plants, cobblestones represent the port, etc. This narrative approach can also be found in the *Jardin de l'Atlantique* situated over the Montparnasse train station in Paris, built by the Parages firm. Or again in the *Promenade* storytale of Puy-de-la-Croix's nature path in the Creuse *département*, organised by Alain Freydet and based on the perceptions and history of the place.

**Immersion in nature.** On the contrary, a landscape architect can forego all representative imagery and prefer to immerse visitors (the public) in the biologic processes of nature, not representing them but rather, presenting them to the public. Some endeavor to go along with the vegetal dynamics in abandoned places. Gabriel Chauvel, an involuntary precursor of the circular economy in the late 2000s, thus transformed a brownfield into a land of adventure and collective creativity in the public mandate of the Loire-Atlantique Department. With the « Third Landscape » concept (2004), Gilles Clément and the Atelier Coloco left the spontaneous biodiversity to its destiny in uncultivated places chosen for this purpose. Clément had announced the project's singular stance with the controversial manifesto of Derborence island in Matisse Park in Lille built between 1990 and 1997.

Other recent projects, like those of Laure Planchais and Bruno Tanant are largely inspired by a nostalgic naturalist sentiment proposing areas of human life close to natural processes (especially in wet environments).

**The formal invention of the meaning of absence.** A third way undertaken by the landscape architect Catherine Mosbach, among others, for the exterior spaces of the new museum of the Louvre in Lens in northern France consists in composing the space to immerse the walker in

the poetry, enigma and uncertainty of a void. But a void full of meaning suggesting the fissures on the graphic surface plunging into ancient underground mines. Inexhaustable, like Lancy park (1979-1989) by Georges Descombes near Geneva, the landscape project thus remains open to all experiences of the imagination.

**Territorial landscape governance.** The last way takes over the landscape governance of territorial projects. This new practice mobilises the parties involved in a municipal or intermunicipal territorial project. Ideally, it constructs a shared landscape policy with elected officials, the inhabitants and all those involved in producing landscapes. This is the case of the landscape charters of regional natural parks or of equivalent territories constructed together by public and private actors and their inhabitants. The « agricultural park » of the Versailles plain is a good example. Since 2003 it has united municipal elected officials, farmers and users in an association of patrimonial management. In a framework of evolution of points of view, it has taken in hand the opening of the plain to the public while restoring the historical memory of the great hunting park of the French kings of the XVII and XVIII centuries. In 2014 a landscape charter fixed the principles of good political conduct for the 27 elected officials of the territory. In the community of the Ance Valley Municipalities in Auvergne, meticulously analysed by Alexis Pernet, the project's method (the journal of landscape ateliers) includes an in-depth survey among the inhabitants, meticulous observation, the collecting of stories and images, sharing, shared decision-making and the stimulation of public involvement. Beyond the envisaged spatial operations, it is the destiny of the inhabitants in the environment of their daily life that is at stake. In actual professional practice, these four types of projects end up mixed, either due to overlapping or hybridizing. They often dialectically include the valorisation of sites and territories with the co-evolution of landscape forms and the points of view of the parties involved.

## 7\_Conclusion

From this overview of the history of French landscape projects, there are four important conclusions to be drawn :

- the European Landscape Convention introduced **radically new and different project practices, more democratic** than those simply uniting the planner and the client, maitre d'œuvre and designer around a site. From an ethical point of view, there has been considerable social and political progress.
- At the same time, **public commissions and professional project practices have clarified and changed their deontology and design purposes.** Designers are now in charge of historic, environmental, social and cultural values which leads to singularizing a site based on its physical character, especially its relief and hydrography. Sustainable development values have progressively set in with the new generation of designers.
- The overall approach of a landscape project has become – differently from garden projects - **a concerted and open preview** of the future of a site or territory. It creates a framework to accompany the continual processes of transformation and modification of spaces. This consideration has revealed itself to be capable of sustaining itself using multiple space management tools such as plans, charters, and photographic landscape observatories.
- Finally, though the profession of landscape architect (represented by IFLA) includes several kinds of jobs (project management, planning, mediation, restauration, programme management,

teaching, research), it is likely that **this only represents part of the professional landscape expertise** emerging today at European level.

Nevertheless, this pragmatic process of action still suffers from numerous limits :

- the near absence of tools to evaluate public actions undertaken
- the difficulty of responding to local needs for inhabitant and user participation in association with projects
- the complexity of the articulation of jobs and the different scales of space and time
- inadequate training of the parties involved – including researchers – in this new policy framework, too often reduced to legal regulations or economic or technical imperatives.

To sum up, there are two complementary ways of looking at a landscape project today :

-**Focused on the mise en scène of a site, on the designer/architect and the client, it maintains part of the aesthetic, symbolic and functional ambitions of its ancestor, the park and garden project,**

-**Focused on the process of co-evolution of territorial projects and the parties involved, it derives primarily from the numerous landscape sciences, especially the geographical, historical, environmental, legal, ecological, and social sciences.**

With thousands of ways of combining, articulating and hybridizing them according to the site, territory and intentions of the parties involved in the governance of the projects.

Today a landscape project is a pragmatic professional practice that depends above all on its sponsors and training in the landscape schools of France and Europe.

None of the ambitions of its historical heritage have been lost. It has striven to respond to the expectations of the French state - the putting in practice of high quality public landscape policies : conserve, adapt, invent.

But it has often confused the objectives of actions and the evaluation of their essential purpose : the well-being in some way of the inhabitants of a territory.

*Florence, 19 Janvier 2018.*

#### **Bibliography**

Conseil de l'Europe, *Dimensions du paysage, réflexions et propositions pour la mise en œuvre de la Convention européenne du paysage*, 2017, 283 p.

J.-M. Besse, «Cartographier, construire, inventer, notes pour une épistémologie de la démarche de projet », *Les Carnets du paysage*, n° 7, 2001.

J.M. Besse, *Le goût du monde*, Actes Sud, 2009.

C. Chomarat-Ruiz (édit.), *Paysage en projets*, Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2016.

P. Donadieu, *Paysages en commun*, pour une éthique des mondes vécus, Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2014.

P. Donadieu, *Scienze del paesaggio, tra teorie e pratiche*, trad. Andrea Inzerillo, Edizioni ETS, 2014.

S. Keravel, *Passeurs de paysages, le projet de paysage comme art relationnel*, MétisPresses, vues Denssemble Essais, 2015.

Y. Luginbühl, « Paysage et démocratie », in Conseil de l'Europe, *Dimensions du paysage, réflexions et propositions pour la mise en œuvre de la Convention européenne du paysage*, 2017, pp. 243-268.

A. Pernet, *Histoire, critique et expérience, Le grand paysage en projet*, MétisPresses, 2014.

F. Pousin (dirigé par), « Autour du projet (de paysage) », dossier, pp. 59-145, *Les Carnets du paysage*, n° 7, 2001