

Art and the Environment: Garden designs of Humphrey Repton and Lancelot Brown

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During the mid eighteenth century poets, garden amateurs and professionals came to an agreement that the doctrine of a landscape should express poetic impressions rather than a standard visual concept or perception (Adams, 1991; 159). “When both national poetry and politics are introduced into the debate on what was the most rational, modern, and appealing approach to the laying out and ornamenting of a garden or park, the subject and the underlying philosophy are bound to become more complicated” (Adams, 1991; 159). French poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire, described certain landscape designers, such as Humphrey Repton and Lancelot Brown, as Romantic artists: “Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling” (Brown, 2001; 8). In this essay several accounts on ‘picturesque’ styles will be brought forth, following visual examples and written discussions on the styles and features of two landscape designers, Brown and Repton. Some main differences between these two landscape designers will also be discussed with reference to the change of styles and perceptions of landscaping through the eighteenth century.

Picturesque Beauty

Many examples of historic eighteenth century landscape gardens are seen throughout Europe, often resembling landscape paintings and evoking poems of the eighteenth century. Each garden is uniquely picturesque and offers places of pleasure. Kemal and Gaskell (1993; 165) state that a “garden can resemble a landscape painting... [and] a painting can be of a garden”, however, both do not have the same functions or representations. Kemal and Gaskell go on to say that gardeners consciously designed gardens with the principles and elements of design, for painting purposes. “Gardeners [took]...into account such painterly concerns as colour, texture, balance, form, perspective, and light and shade in laying out grounds” (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993; 165).

Consequently, the gardens became places of pleasure for occupants and visually appealing scenes for artists to re-create two-dimensionally.

Notions of picturesque relations between gardens and paintings were introduced in the late eighteenth century as a way to view natural scenes and be reminded of them through paintings, thus increasing the viewing pleasures of particular places (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993; 165). Picturesque styles became more advocated, and the landscape designs, particularly of Lancelot Brown, were opposed, however some of his designs have been maintained throughout history and continue today. Even though Brown was an accomplished landscape designer, the desire for 'new' styles were apparent, thus the designs of Humphrey Repton became the modernised gardens in the later eighteenth century, primarily because of his aesthetic theories (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993; 166). Kemal and Gaskell (1993; 187) discuss that ideas of picturesque sceneries are based on illustrative composition, revealed through an array of design and sometimes irregularity; the law of chance or random layout, with emphasis on natural textures and forms. "Indeed the eighteenth century writers referred to the designers of picturesque landscape gardens as "improvers" of nature, adding variety, complexity, and an element of surprise to natural beauty" (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993; 187).

The Designs of Lancelot Brown

Earlier in the 1700s, garden designs by well known designers became somewhat placid and formulaic and the styles were described as being monotonous. However, during the time of Lancelot Brown, primarily from the 1750s onwards, styles of landscape garden designs were altered. Ideas of utilising the whole surrounding environment or using the natural elements of a landscape for intuitiveness were preferred, and all allegorical concepts and traditional references were eliminated; "Brown saw unembellished topography as the tool of emotive expression" (Schama, 1995; 539). As a result, the effects of designing such landscapes of pureness had to involve hard work of levelling or raising the grounds; lakes were dug, meadows were extended and ingenuity of landscapes, with the use of mechanical contrivances, became a new fad in terms of profit and pleasure (Schama, 1995; 540).

In 1751, after working 10 years as the head gardener for Lord Cobham at Stowe, Brown became a very fashionable and popular independent landscape gardener, but rather liked to be referred to as a ‘place-maker’ (Topp, 2010). Later Brown became renowned for his speeches on country estates and having positive capabilities to improve the landscapes, thus became known as Capability Brown. Instead of reproducing the common formal geometric styles of gardening, Brown concentrated on perfecting or enhancing the natural features of the English landscape. Main features in Brown’s work included “...grass meadows in front of mansions, serpentine lakes, encircling carriage drives, belts and circular clumps of trees, and circular garden walks. Bridges or cascades often were used to connect the ‘natural’ lakes” (Topp, 2010). Some of Brown’s landscape designs include the estate of Harewood House, Blenheim Palace, Chatsworth House, Bowood and Longleat in Wiltshire, Prior Park, and Stowe.

“The ultimate secret of Brown’s achievements...was that he had a complete grasp of the physical, visual landscape counterpart to his patrons’ idealism, their politics, and their concept of beauty. This concept was summed up by William Hogarth’s published book in 1753, *The Analysis of Beauty*, around the time that Brown announced his career as a landscape improver” (Adams, 1991; 173). Some of Brown’s landscape designs, quite often had to include a whole re-construction of formal gardens from earlier decades, many of which had been well matured for a hundred years (Adams, 1991; 173). Despite this, Brown continued to carrying out his plans with confidence and often with no remorse, as he was determined to change the landscape and create new places with different charisma.

Landscape Designs of Humphrey Repton

While Lancelot Brown was at the start of a flourishing landscape design career in 1752, Humphrey Repton was born. When Repton was of age, his family expected him to become a merchant but his real passion and interest was in botany, entomology and gardening. After some time working in Ireland as private secretary to Lord Lieutenant William Windham, and making many acquaintances, Repton returned to Essex, determined to be a successful improver of the landscape, equivalent to Brown (Topp,

2010). Repton's garden styles considered the vision of the architecture and how it was positioned in relation to the surrounding landscape. Repton saw gardening as an art form with the landscape as his canvas, his ideal being "natural" beauty enhanced by art (Topp, 2011). Some features in Repton's designs include terraced grounds, circuit walks with raised and separate flower gardens. In Repton's book *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, he stated that the perfection of landscape gardening consists of four requisites:

Firstly, it must display the natural beauties and hide the defects of every situation. Secondly, it should give the appearance of extent and freedom by carefully disguising or hiding the boundary. Thirdly, it must studiously conceal every interference of art. However expensive by which the natural scenery is improved; making the whole appear the production of nature only; and fourthly, all objects of mere convenience or comfort, if incapable of being made ornamental, or of becoming proper parts of the general scenery, must be removed or concealed (Topp, 2011).

During the eighteenth century the *Palladian villa* of Kenwood, home of a well-known judge, William Murray, was established by Robert Adam with stunning Greek-style columns and a garden façade beneath a stylish pediment. Before Repton, the gardens were remodelled several times over the years, and by the end of the century the third Earl of Mansfield completed the gardens to the designs of Repton, where he pushed back extensive groves of trees and created a park that swept down to an ornamental lake (Schama, 1995; 520). During this time the landscape was dubbed as 'charming' by an advertiser in *The Morning Herald*; Schama (1995; 520) described it as 'playing to the Arcadian market'. The landscape featured colourful flower beds, raised terraces overlooking views of the lakes and distant lands, circuit routes and meadows. Repton was well-known for designing planned circuit walks, which provided a "series of evocative views, contrasts and surprises" (English Heritage, 2011). *Observations on Modern Gardening*, written by Thomas Whately in 1770, pointed out that gardens or landscape designs should express character and reconcile the qualities of beauty, independence and attractive narratives; landscapes are distinct emblems and have expressive characteristics

displayed within garden designs (Hunt, 1992; 75). For Repton, adding character within landscapes was essential in achieving work for individual clients.

The concept of picturesque theory in landscaping is often described as having three aspects: a foreground that is regular, geometric and designed to be used; a middle-ground like serpentine parks; and a background of natural scenery. “The idea was applied to country estates by making a terrace as a 'Beautiful' foreground, and then forming a 'transition' to a 'Picturesque' park, and beyond to a 'Sublime' background” (Turner, 2008). *Sheringham Hall* embraces one of Repton’s landscape designs; having a history that Richard Payne Knight, critic and advocate of the Picturesque style, dubbed as a dramatic picturesque garden. Two drawings of the site illustrate examples of how Knight imagined the landscape to be with a dramatic scene of un-pruned trees and a rocky cascade, which is the typical romanticism picturesque style; Repton however, designed the grounds with a more neat layout and placid stream, intending to impress on emotions, like the poetry of Samuel Coleridge (Georgian Index, 2006).

Dixon Hunt (1992; 140) argues that much of Repton’s landscape works were identified as being a common picturesque or naturalistic style by certain theoreticians, such as Knight, and two important and related aspects of his career were ignored: “Repton was too attentive to the current needs and sites of his patrons to perpetuate aesthetics irrelevant to their situations...[and] he proved to have been fundamentally more conservative...”, especially with the viewpoints of Alistair Duckworth, who explained Repton’s work as being a radical innovation or of a destructive nature (Hunt, 1992; 140). According to Hunt (1992; 140), Repton was keen to accept the aesthetics of landscape, but desired to do so by his recognition and assumption of a professional role.

Hunt (1992; 146) also discusses that Repton’s early designs were obviously placed within the picturesque category and traditions because of his designs which often hid houses and buildings within the trees and gardens. Later however, Repton realised and commented that a house and garden are both seen by people who move around, thus the foundations are not always hidden. Repton soon revised his designs to suit the perspectives, needs and

taste of many clients, however because of his early visual thinking; the terms of picturesque continued to be labelled in his work. To a certain extent, these characteristics had merits, as some estate owners desired to acquire these certain picturesque styles (Hunt, 1992; 146). Harewood House, Longleat, Blaise Castle Estate, Brighton Royal Pavilion, Tatton Park and Woburn Abbey are among the many estates that Repton designed, which express unique character and stylishness.

Differences between the designs of Repton and Brown

Similarities are noticeable between the landscape works of Brown and Repton, such as the circular garden walks, sweeping meadows, terraced grounds and separate garden beds, but they are somewhat different with their ideas, approaches and many garden formations. Although Repton set out to follow on from Brown, in practice his career as a landscape designer was considerably different from Brown's. "For Repton, the works were self-consciously works of art: proposals presented in watercolour views, reproducing his commissions in prints...and articulating his aesthetics in elaborate and expensive publications" (Boot, 2010). According to Adams (1991; 179), Brown did not publish any of his theories, and many of his working drawings did not survive. Repton, however, established fame through writings and ideas documented in what is known as the *Red Book*, where he recorded ideas for property clients to visualise and consider alternative designs. Brown simply saw himself as a contractor, architect, engineer and agricultural improver of the landscape, a 'place-maker' or gardener.

In 1794 Repton entered into the theoretical debates about the picturesque styles, and thus prepared a list of the 'Sources of Pleasure in Landscape Gardening'. These studies and identified terms were "...congruity, utility, order, symmetry, picturesque effect, intricacy, simplicity, variety, novelty, contrast, continuity, association grandeur, appropriation, animation and the seasons" (Adams, 1991; 182). 'Variety' was Repton's favourite term, as it replaced the interpretations of eighteenth century 'nature'; his terraces planted with a variety of flowers, including steps and balustrades, created a casual and welcoming atmosphere.

Since 'variety' evaded any precise definition and rules, it served Repton's purpose to avoid the hard and fast formulae that were beginning to be applied by Brown's followers without much talent or imagination. What Repton sought to do...was to visually dramatize the vague character of 'appropriateness' and 'variety' through illustrations (Adams, 1991; 182).

Brown's philosophy was based on 'nature' and how the concepts of variety were introduced in nature, simply by copying components of it and assisting in the functions of the environment or manipulating land forms into ideal landscapes (Hunt, 1992; 149). Brown shaped the landscape into an attractive whole, whereas Repton recognised landscapes to be a creation to meet the social needs of his clients. Compared to the bare and bald styles of Brown's smooth lawns reaching up to the building walls, Repton made a decision to incorporate older garden elements of large treed areas, hedge borders and trellis walkways, in order to achieve an imitation of nature in a neat and orderly fashion (Bermingham, 1987; 170). Repton modified the idea of spanning smooth lawns up to buildings by creating accurately arranged flower beds and bushes close to the buildings; replacing the unoccupied grounds with gardens of introduced exotic plants, evidently diverse to Brown's 'pure' ideas and designs (Bermingham, 1987; 170).

Conclusion

Repton and Brown have each developed styles that continue to be thought of today as useful, unique and aesthetic designs; often mixed and matched with personal touches and foreign ideas, because 'variety' in society is a desired effect for improvement and success. Landscape designs by Repton and Brown, whether picturesque or not, offer a unique environment for many individual needs; whether the landscape was designed as a whole attractive landscape, like the work of Brown, or whether it displayed poetic character or colourful garden designs, they express equal qualities that evidently imitate elements of nature, not in exact truth, but bringing into account the ideas of variety, utility, order, symmetry, simplicity, novelty and contrast within the surrounding environment. Both Brown and Repton improved and enhanced the landscape through intuitive and inventive methods of design.

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