Representation and Design in Historic Gardens

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A comprehensive landscape architectural project

In 1599, the Flemish painter Giusto Utens (?-1609) was commissioned by Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici to create seventeen large-scale lunette paintings to decorate the banquet hall of the Villa di Artimino. These lunettes depicted the most representative villas constructed by the powerful Florentine family over a century and a half, forming one of the most distinctive landscape programs in history. The villas, with their houses, gardens, and landscapes, were located in various areas around Florence, symbolizing territorial occupation and the Medici family's power, particularly during the eras of Cosimo the Elder, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany.
The seventeen lunettes, fourteen of which are preserved, were painted by Utens between 1599 and 1602. They serve as a graphic record of these landscapes, representing a comprehensive project commissioned by one of the most culturally significant Italian families in 15th and 16th-century. Although the original designs of the villas have not survived, the collection of lunettes acts as a unified compendium of the project, brought together through the artistic vision of a single painter.
The villas are depicted from a bird's-eye view, employing a technique that establishes a sense of uniformity across the diverse examples and provides a perspective particularly suited for conveying not only the layout of the gardens but also their relationship to the surrounding landscape. These lunettes can be considered a pinnacle of excellence in the representation of garden spaces. Furthermore, Utens's

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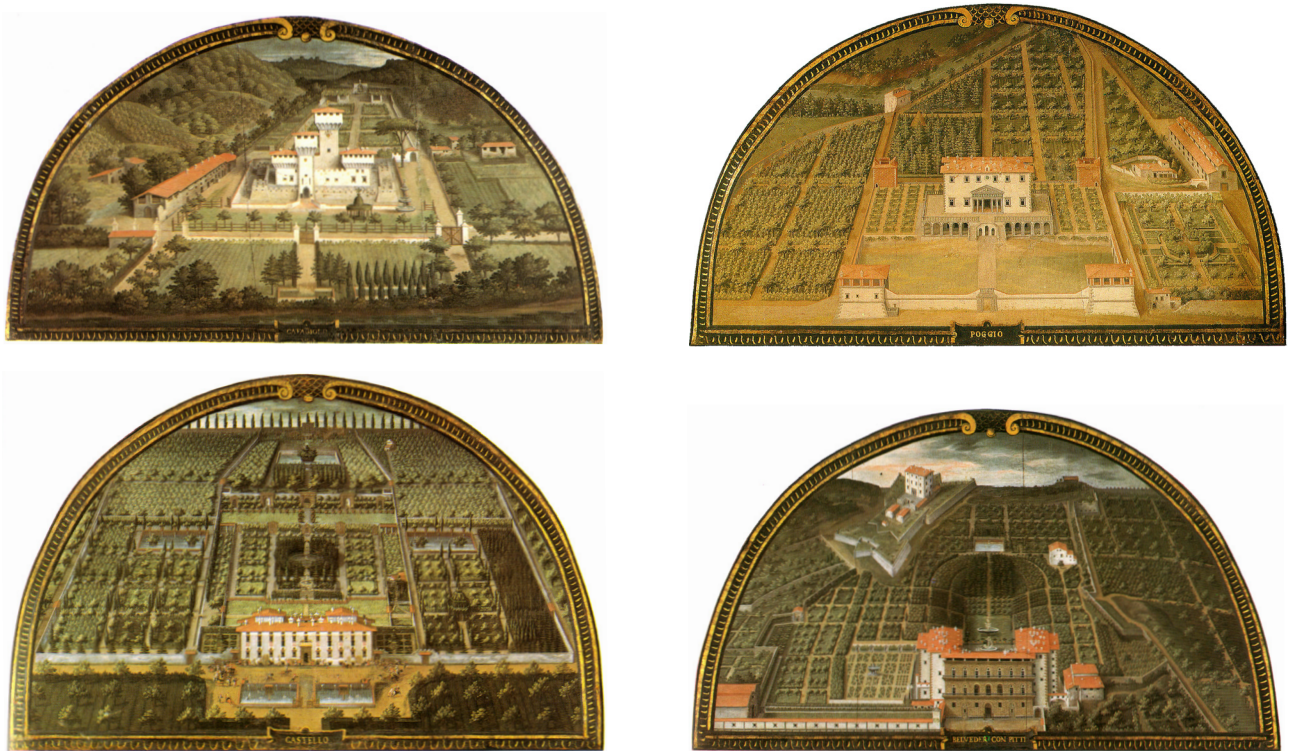


Fig. 1. G. Utens, Villa di Artimino, lunettes, 1599-1602. Top left: Cafaggiolo; top right: Poggio a Caiano; bottom left: Castello; bottom right: Boboli

meticulous attention to detail transforms these works into unique documents for the study and understanding of these historic gardens. Lets briefly analyze some of them.
Cafaggiolo (1451) (fig. 1, top left) is one of the earliest examples of transforming medieval defensive structures into villas with recreational gardens, based on a design by the architect Michelozzo. In Utens's lunette, one can precisely observe how Renaissance garden elements were gradually added to the medieval structure: axes, grids, pavilions, topiary, and avenues extending to the river and opening into the landscape. This represents an early attempt to create an orderly and rigorous project, akin to a primitive landscape manifesto.
Poggio a Caiano (1485) (fig. 1, top right) epitomizes the triumph of geometric precision and architectural rigor. Giuliano da Sangallo's layout extends from the house to the cryptoporticus and the grid-patterned gardens, and beyond to the surrounding agricultural landscape, all subjected to the same ordered structure and the entirety seamlessly integrated. Poggio embodies the classical order into landscape design.
Castello (1538) (fig. 1, bottom left) is a Mannerist apotheosis, featuring a meticulous representation of the narrative elements Niccolò Tribolo crafted to serve Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany's grand metaphor: Venus, the spring; Florence, the allusion to the circular labyrinth of the Isle of Cythera in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499); the rivers Arno and Mugnone; the Grotto of the Animals, and finally, at the highest point, the Apennines from which the entire epic narrative springs. By the time the lunette was painted,

the gardens had already undergone significant transformations. However, Utens takes a fascinating approach to recovering memory, as he appears to depict the initial project or an idealized version that was never fully realized. In this way, the painting gains a clearly projective sense, offering extraordinary information that is highly effective for understanding the intricate world of the Castello garden.
Boboli (1549) (fig. 1, bottom right) was commissioned by the Spanish Èleonora of Toledo, wife of Cosimo I, and designed by Niccolò Tribolo as an extension of Brunelleschi's Pitti Palace. Once again, the lunette provides valuable information, as the garden underwent significant modifications over time. The central area is depicted as an ordered valley with meadows and small groves bordered by pathways along the slopes, culminating axially in a pavilion with a pond at the highest point. For many, this space is seen as one of the reinterpretations of a similar feature –a hippodrome-shaped garden– described by Pliny the Younger in his Villa of Tusculum, as recounted in his letters. This serves as yet another reference to the influence of the ancient Roman world on Italian landscape culture in the 16th century.
Pratolino (1569-1581) (fig. 2) is arguably one of the most extraordinary gardens ever constructed. When Utens painted it, the garden was relatively new, so we can assume there is little imagination and a significant degree of reality in the painting. Utens faced a dilemma: Pratolino was a very elongated and sloping property, with the house positioned in the middle and two large gardens, one at the back and one at the front. However, in the lunette, the house appears at the top of the garden: Utens only paints the front portion and omits the back.
There is a logical explanation: if he had he painted the entire garden, it would not fill the width of the lunette. There is also a more conceptual, though riskier, explanation: the front garden was more innovative, with its winding pathways, which were much more interesting than the layout of the back garden. I tend to agree with the latter.
In the front garden, there are ponds, a sequence of cascades resembling artificial dams, grottos with automatons, fountains with automatons, and mythological scenes that also seem to include automatons, a world of wonders that Utens describes in great detail. This depiction becomes an excellent source of information, especially since the garden has almost completely disappeared.
Over time, the villa welcomed notable visitors, such as Michel de Montaigne, who praised its natural and

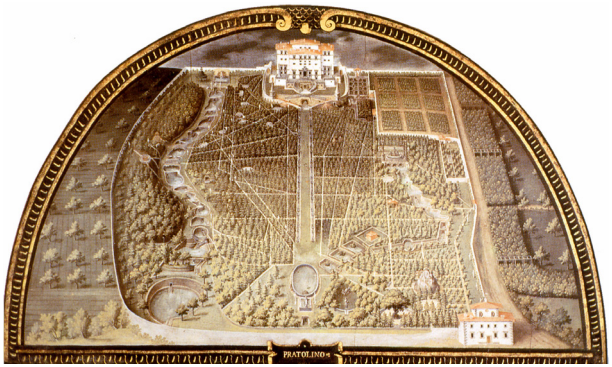


Fig. 2. G. Utens, Villa di Artimino, lunette, 1599-1602. Pratolino.

mechanical marvels. In the 18th century, what remained of the garden was visited by travelers such as the English architect William Kent. Undoubtedly, Kent found inspiration in this ruined garden to create other gardens in the English countryside, filled with references to the classical world for the enjoy of their owners. Eventually, the garden became the property of the Duke of Davidoff, who transformed it into a landscape garden, leaving few traces of its Mannerist past. Today, only a few elements from the lunette are still recognizable.

Plan and perspectival space

In his book *The Concept of Architectural Space* [Argan 1982], historian Giulio Carlo Argan describes an important shift in the 17th century in the conception of space in architecture, from an idea of 'representation' during the Renaissance to a very different one of 'determination' in the Baroque period. This shift enabled the transition from an 'architecture of composition' to an 'architecture of formal determination'. From our perspective, one of the milestones in this transition did not occur in the construction of buildings but rather in garden design, spearheaded by the Frenchman André Le Nôtre (1613-1700), who can be considered one of the greatest landscape architects of all time. We use the term 'landscape architect' rather than the more common 'gardener' because his art and technique went far beyond the simple act of gardening; he was a masterful creator of landscapes.

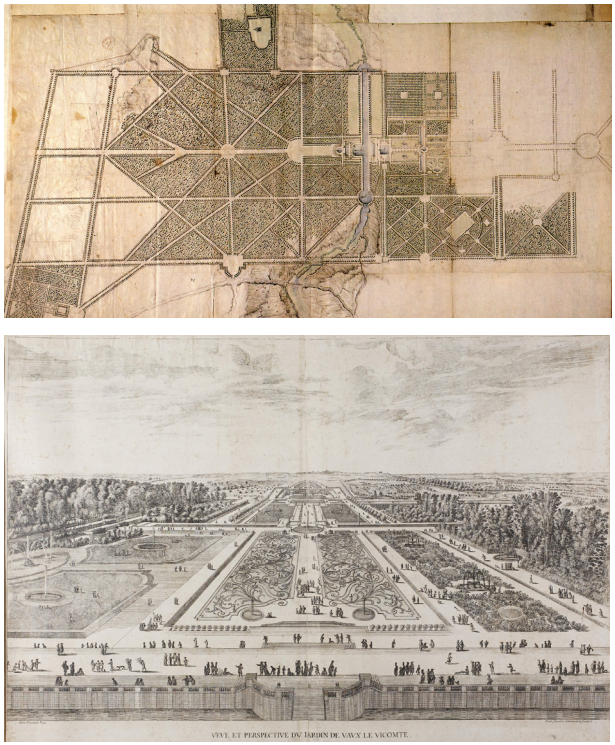


Fig. 3. Vaux-le-Vicomte. Above: A. Le Nôtre (attributed): plan; bottom: I. Silvestre, view.

In 1625, in a text titled *Of Gardens*, the English poet and politician Francis Bacon referred to the garden as a more refined and perfect art than architecture itself. Le Nôtre's gardens illustrate this reflection beautifully, particularly at Vaux-le-Vicomte (fig. 3) and Versailles. The former is remarkable for the intelligence of its design, and the latter for its mastery of large-scale planning, controlling a perspective that stretches nearly four kilometers. Le Nôtre's gardens are laboratories of spatial experimentation, exemplifying what Argan called the space of formal determination. Le Nôtre designed spaces purely for the eyes of the viewer, relying on the garden's plan while distorting it to extraordinary degrees to achieve unparalleled optical effects. This resulted in a rare perfection in the organization of all elements to construct perspectives that, as at Versailles, seem to strive toward capturing infinity, in line with Leonardo Benevolo's accurate definition [Benevolo 1994].

In the plan of Vaux-le-Vicomte, Le Nôtre developed a series of mechanisms designed solely to serve the viewer's vision. It could be said that this is a scientific garden, aligned with the philosophical and mathematical thinking of René Descartes [1], a constructed thought process, a discourse turned into a method in the form of a garden. Every element of the plan is intentionally deformed, elongated, or even hidden to create a sense of surprise for the viewer, who walks through a garden that is not what it appears to be. This is achieved with extraordinary precision in measurements, distances, and perspectival correspondences.

The garden thus becomes a giant anamorphosis, a type of representation intentionally distorted so that, from a specific vantage point, it appears perfect to the viewer's eye. Famous examples of this technique exist in painting, such as *The Ambassadors* (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger, where a skull is cleverly disguised using this method. In the works of some contemporary artists like Felice Varini and George Rousse, anamorphosis becomes entirely experimental. At Vaux-le-Vicomte, the anamorphosis is embedded in the garden plan, which does not aim for complete compositional beauty but instead serves as a systematic foundation for spatial construction. This aesthetic departure from the plan reveals, beyond its Baroque inspiration, a hint of modernity. Ultimately, Vaux-le-Vicomte is much more than a mere garden.

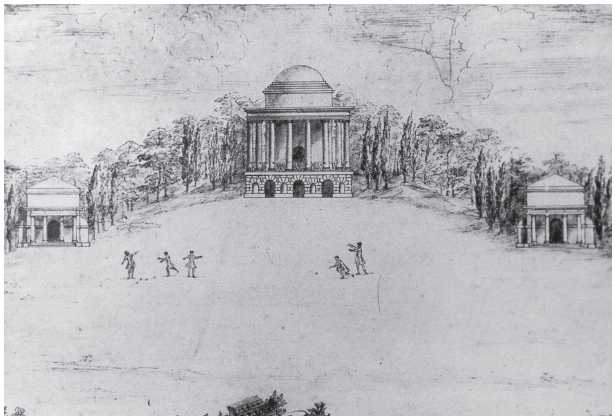


Fig. 4. W. Kent, garden scene.

Fig. 5. W. Kent, Rousham, 1738. Garden plan and drawing of the Valley of Venus.

Drawing as a tool for landscape design

During the 18th century in England, a true revolution occurred in the way landscapes and gardens were represented and designed. First, the geometric model imposed by French gardens across European courts faded away. Then, there was a turn to the past, creating a classical narrative as a starting point. Finally, this narrative became enriched with small architectural features scattered throughout the garden spaces, establishing a new spatial sense both in representation and design.
William Kent (ca. 1685-1748) –an architect, painter, decorator, and scenographer– embodied this transformation like few others. Deeply influenced by his friend, the poet Alexander Pope, who laid the conceptual and formal foundations of a new idea of landscape, Kent spent several years in Italy, studying architecture and gardens. He brought the vision of the classical world into the English landscape, effectively creating a new mythology in gardens such as Chiswick (for his friend and patron Lord Burlington), Stowe, and Rousham (fig. 4).
An excellent draftsman, Kent used graphic tools as a means of representing his ideas about garden spaces. His designs consistently followed a pattern: isolated scenes in which an open meadow occupies the foreground, populated by

Fig. 6. L. Brown, Wimpole, 1767. Garden plan with the arrangement of the trees.

people strolling or engaging in games or other activities. In the background, small-scale classical architecture, often directly referencing Italian culture, is framed by a final edge of trees –clumps or belts– that close the composition and focus the viewer's gaze. In this way, Kent created distinctly scenographic spaces in every corner of his gardens.
In the garden at Rousham, Kent worked on an earlier design by Charles Bridgeman, overlaying it with a sequence of scenes that revolve around the small Cherwell River, which acts as the garden's natural boundary. The layout clearly reveals this organization, with each scene separated by curtains of trees depicted in elevation, as if in an oblique perspective rather than a traditional plan. One of the garden's most iconic features, and one of Kent's most remarkable drawings, is the Valley of Venus. This representation captures Kent's genius: hybrid elements of grotto, waterfall, and bridge are arranged axially; carefully placed trees create depth; statues of two satyrs symmetrically spy on a bathing Venus; and figures casually wander through the scene, seemingly oblivious to its intensity (fig. 5).
After Kent's death, Lancelot Brown (1716-1783), a gardener trained under Kent at Stowe, took up the mantle. Brown developed a purely landscape-focused model, stripped of architecture and built with water, gently undulating terrain, and trees. These elements became the building blocks of a distinctly modern language. Brown was less concerned with individual scenes and more focused on overall spatial planning. For this reason, his designs primarily used plans, with trees depicted at their true scale, like in oblique or axonometric perspective, in a manner reminiscent of Kent's techniques (fig. 6).
Humphry Repton (1752-1818), a great admirer of Brown's work, adhered to his principles regarding the potential of sites and their improvement. However, Repton took representation as a design tool one step further, moving away from plans and returning to spatial representation, much like Kent. In this regard, Repton developed a completely innovative design methodology that can be seen as the origin of modern project mechanisms. In each project, Repton compiled his work into notebooks, which he later bound in red and called *Red Books*. These books included all his proposals for site improvements using a highly effective technique. A skilled watercolorist, Repton drew different views of the existing landscape and, by overlaying cut-out flaps within the book, showed the 'before' and 'after' of a scene. This allowed clients to see the transformation that

Fig. 7. H. Repton. Red Book, before and after of a scene from Wembley Garden.

would occur in their gardens simply by lifting the paper flap. The technique offered both a surprise for the client and satisfaction for the designer. In this way, Repton invented a method that, in some sense, has endured to this day in various formats and mediums (fig. 7).

Representation and design in the 19th century urban park

In 18th century in England there were some early examples of urban garden creation, such as the interventions in Bath by John Wood I and II (1704-1754; 1728-1782), which introduced gardens into a sequence of three urban spaces: Queen Square, King's Circus, and the Royal Crescent. However, it was architect John Nash (1752-1835) who, in 1811, began defining a model for urban parks through a real estate project of high architectural quality promoted by the Prince Regent (later George IV): Regent's Park.
Nash had collaborated on several projects with Humphry Repton a few years earlier and learned garden design techniques from him, even adopting Repton's method of illustrating 'before and after' sequences in some of his projects. In the various iterations of the Regent's Park project over the years, one can observe the evolution and influence of Repton, although Nash consistently relied on the plan as the primary representational system.
In the first 1811 version, the garden –with its meadow, trees, and water features– was barely present on the plan, overwhelmed by numerous housing blocks. However, in the second and better-known version of the same year,

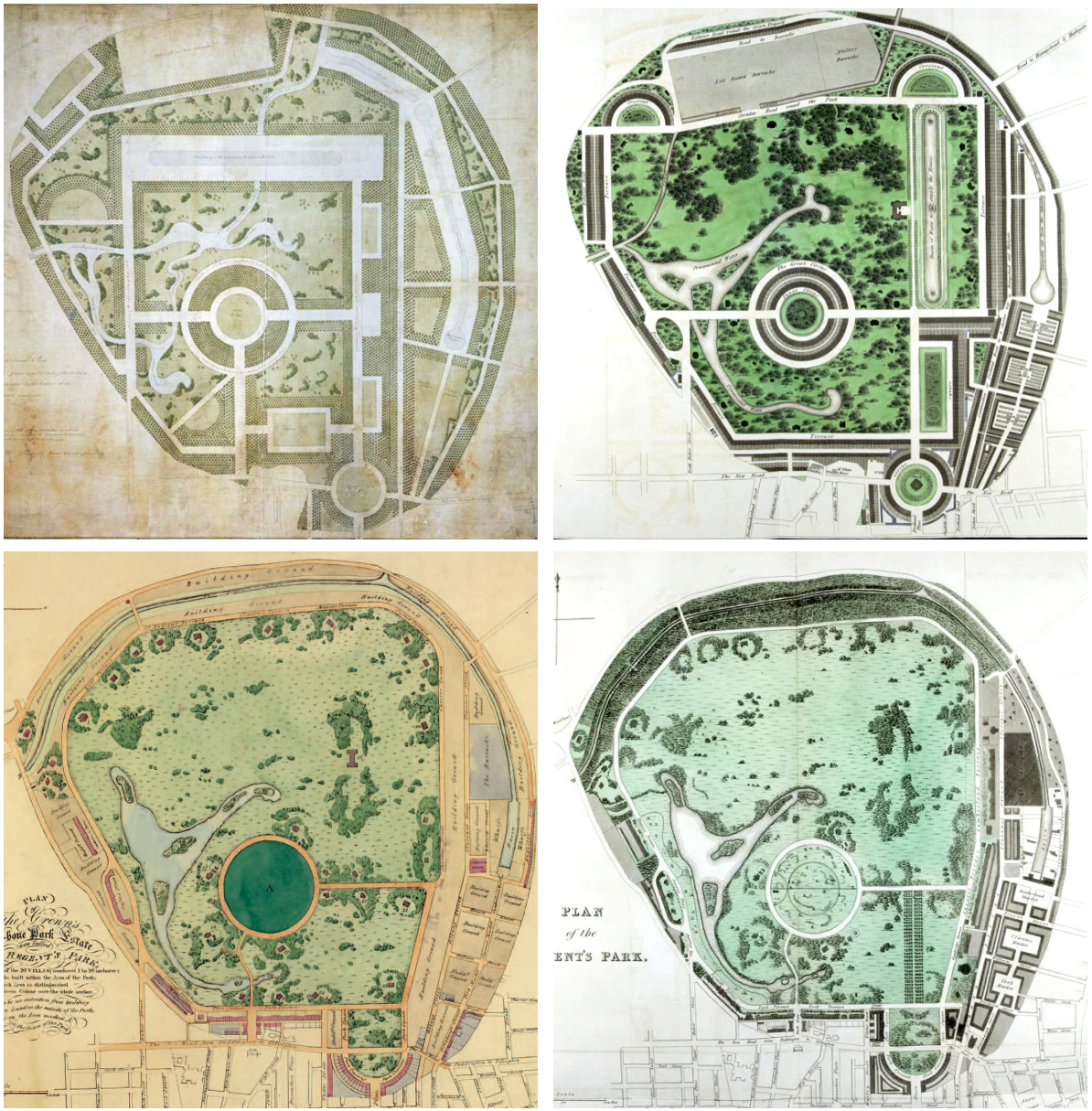


Fig. 8. J. Nash, Regent's Park. 1st Project, 1811; 2nd Project, 1811; Project 1825; Project 1826.

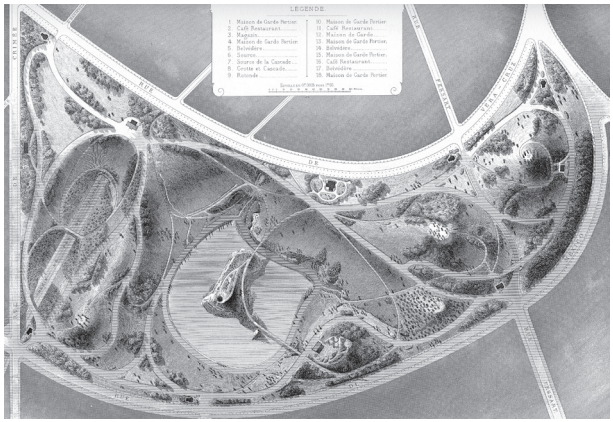
the garden gained prominence through the addition of a serpentine lake in the typical style of Capability Brown and a careful arrangement of vegetation. This phase of the project was highly innovative, achieving an elegant coexistence of housing and parkland that anticipated, by more than a century, the proposals of Le Corbusier. Ultimately, the speculative real estate venture did not fully succeed, leaving behind the final form of the park as we know it today, retaining traces of the original design (fig. 8).

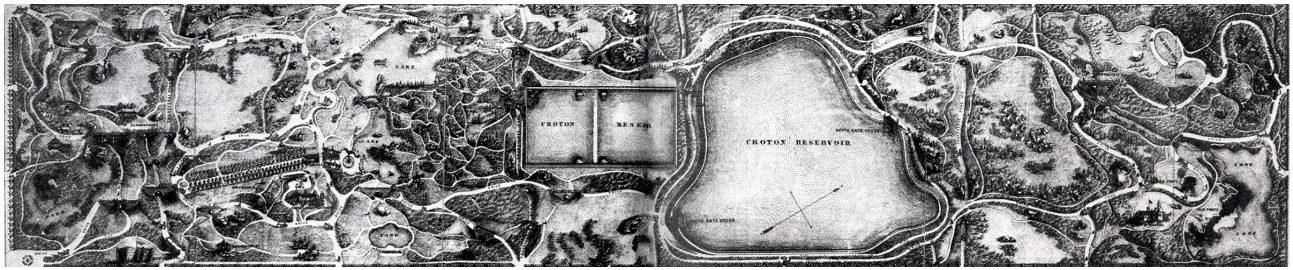
Much admiration is given to the transformations carried out in Paris by Baron Haussmann (Georges Eugène, 1809-1891) in the second half of the 19th century, with his large-scale urban redesign. However, it is often overlooked that, most probably, one of the most significant contributions came from the *Service de Promenades et Embellissements*, directed by engineer Adolphe Alphand (1817-1891). With the assistance of architects, engineers, and landscape designers, Alphand completely renewed the great Bois de Boulogne and Bois de Vincennes, created dozens of landscaped squares modeled after their London counterparts, and designed three new urban parks: Parc Monceau, Parc Montsouris, and Parc des Buttes-Chaumont. The latter is a marvel of garden history and an outstanding example of using drawing as a tool for landscape design, as illustrated in Alphand's own book, *Promenades de Paris* [Alphand 1984].

The drawings and engravings in Alphand's book highlight the importance of graphic representation in realizing the project. The site had previously been one of the city's abandoned spaces, originally a Roman-era gypsum quarry, later used for executions (where bodies were left hanging in the open), and eventually a landfill and tanning area, a true urban wasteland. The creation of the park marked a dramatic transformation and is one of the earliest examples –if not the first– of urban regeneration, a concept so common today.

In one of Alphand's plans, the park's pre- and post-intervention topography is represented with contour lines in gray (before) and brown (after). The drawing demonstrates the designers' skill in leveraging the terrain's natural features to craft a new, romantic topography within a project that remained highly functional from every perspective. Another drawing presents the park's layout with its full relief and orography. While a color version exists, the black-and-white engraving is exceptionally expressive and is considered one of the most beautiful drawings in garden history. At the park's center there is a lake with an island –a

Fig. 9. A. Alphand, Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, Paris. Contour and representation plans.





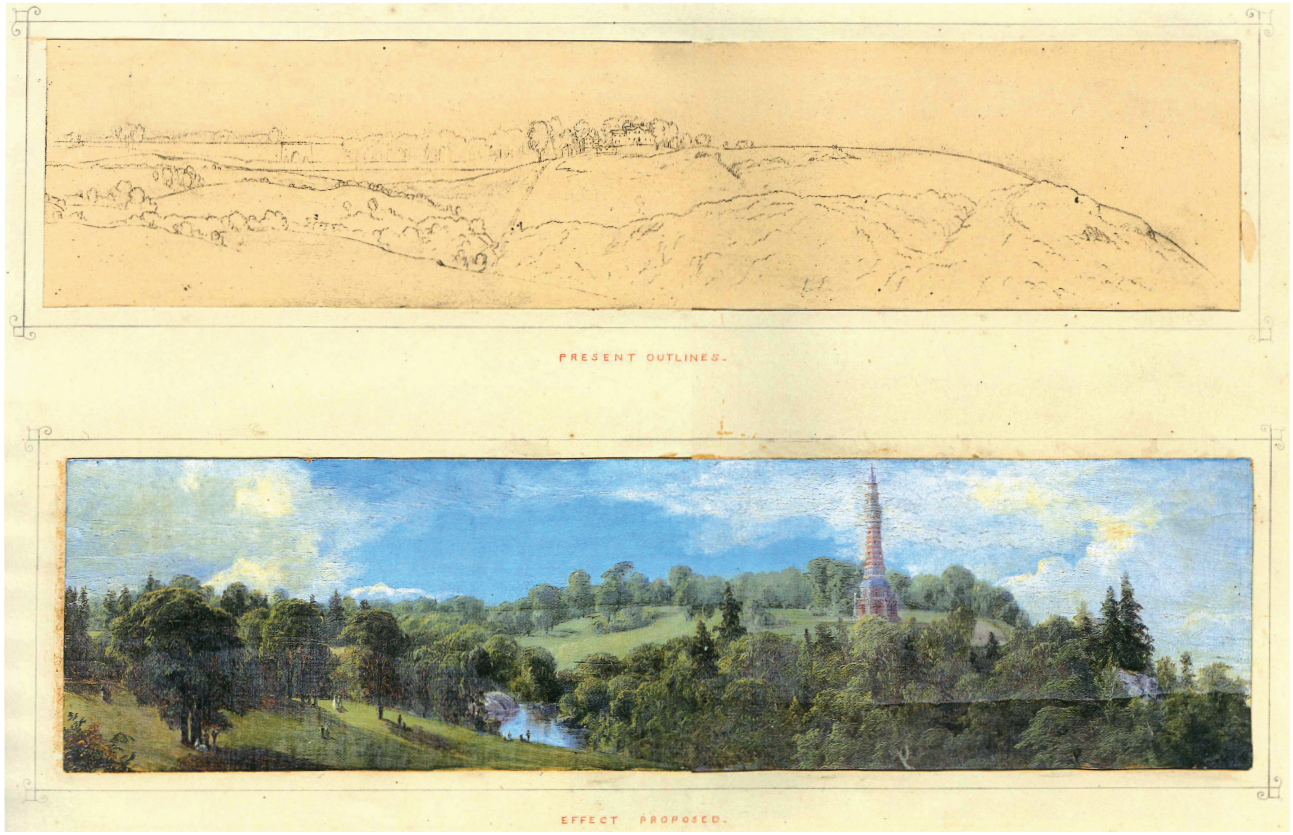


Fig. 10. F.L. Olmsted, C. Vaux. Competition plan of Central Park, New York.

Fig. 11. F.L. Olmsted and C. Vaux. Study No. 9 of the Greensward project for the Central Park competition. Bogardus Hill and Monumental Tower, showing "present outlines" and "effect proposed".

Fig. 12. F.L. Olmsted and C. Vaux. Study No. 5 of the Greensward project for the Central Park competition. "Across the lake from Vista Rock", showing "present outlines" and "effect proposed".

mound built on the quarry remnants– topped by a circular classical temple and connected to the lake's edges by two bridges: one a grand brick arch and the other a suspension bridge with a distinctly industrial aesthetic, both as elements of the park. The grotto and waterfall were built using part of the old quarry. Gracefully curving pathways blend harmoniously with the terrain's contours, masterfully modeled by the designers. The vegetation depicted in the plan was entirely planted on the modified terrain, adding shape and volume to the park's design with remarkable precision. On the left side of the plan, the integration of the pre-existing railway line with the new park layout is evident: a delicate and clearly modern exercise. The inclusion of technology and new advances within the urban park is seamlessly represented in the plan (fig. 9).

In New York, the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 established the framework for creating a central city park. However, as the century progressed, developers resisted losing so much valuable land, delaying the park's placement to inner Manhattan until it was finally approved in 1853, between 5th and 8th Avenues and 59th and 106th Streets, at a time when the city's development extended only to 40th Street. The first concept for the park was designed by engineer Egbert Ludovicus Viele (1825-1902), who created a well-known survey of the site. The commission was later assigned to Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), who had a similar background as agricultural engineer, but had traveled through Europe and had been inspired by the new English parks within cities, particularly Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, created a few years earlier by Joseph Paxton. After administrative delays, a competition was held in 1857, which was won by the team of Olmsted and English architect Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) with their project *Greensward*. Their design depicted a truly Arcadian landscape in the heart of Manhattan. In their presentation, the team used a general plan but also included views showing the 'before and 'after' of the intervention, similar to Repton's method, which they continued to use throughout the project's development (fig. 10).

The plan meticulously represents all park features, interconnected by an ingenious four-level circulation system (transverse roads, carriage circuits, bridle paths, and pedestrian paths) and articulated by over 40 bridges designed by Vaux. The plan showcases Olmsted and Vaux's mastery of the park's overall organization.

The construction of Central Park was a colossal undertaking, demonstrating New York society's capacity to mobilize resources for such a monumental endeavor. Massive

Fig. 13. F.L. Olmsted and C. Vaux. Study No. 4 of the Greensward project for the Central Park competition. "Northeast view towards Vista Rock", showing "present outlines" and "effect proposed".

earthworks, extensive underground infrastructure, and the transplantation of tens of thousands of large trees transformed a continuous granite-strewn terrain into a nearly naturalistic landscape of lakes, hills, and pavilions. This carefully crafted environment, which Rem Koolhaas described as a "synthetic Arcadia," embodies the best ideals of the park (fig. 11).

The dramatic transformation is vividly illustrated in graphic representations showing the 'present outlines' and 'effect proposed', employing Repton's approach in the competition documentation and project development. The authors also used drawing and early photography to depict the site's barren state, with rocks visible in the original landscape that were later seamlessly integrated into new scenes represented in detailed watercolors. These illustrations capture the extraordinary transformation of the landscape, turning it into an almost unrecognizable masterpiece within a few years.

Today, when we observe Central Park from the tall buildings surrounding it, it appears to be a fragment of primeval nature preserved within the city. This illusion was precisely the authors' intent, but it is only when we examine the extensive graphic documentation of the project that we fully comprehend the scale of the transformation undertaken by Olmsted and Vaux, a monumental effort with an unparalleled result (figs. 12,13).

Notes

[1] We can relate the mechanisms of the garden to the *Discourse on the Dioptrics*, one of the chapters of the *Discourse on the Method*, published in 1637.

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