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An Urban Awakening to the Sense of Life

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Dumbarton Oaks

The gardens of Stig Andersson breathe a new life into Scandinavian cities. He seeks to re-awaken the senses of town dwellers living in or visiting his gardens by introducing a new regime of sensitivity that assumes equivalence between human work and natural life.¹ Trees, grasses, wood, stones, sea-shells as well as cast iron, corten steel, wire nets, neon glass tubes, concrete or tarmac are some of the materials he uses in a way that is sometimes reminiscent of Isamu Noguchi's explorations of the various textures of sculptural stone. Yet even the stones he has set into the concrete pavement of the walk along the canal at Ankarparken in Malmö do not stand only as sculptural objects. (ILL 1) Their number calls attention to differences between them, and their vicinity to geometrical objects made of concrete, technical objects of metal, and engraved designs in the pavement, invites attention to a whole range of qualitative differences beyond the ones they exhibit by themselves. In a baroque garden, forms are either repetitive: topiary trees, hedges, elements of *broderie*, or cut pieces of parterre, or highly distinctive: statues, fountains, pavilions, grottoes. Only the last ones are supposed to call the attention of visitors, as it was so tellingly illustrated by the instructions Louis XIV gave for the visits of ambassadors in his gardens at Versailles.²

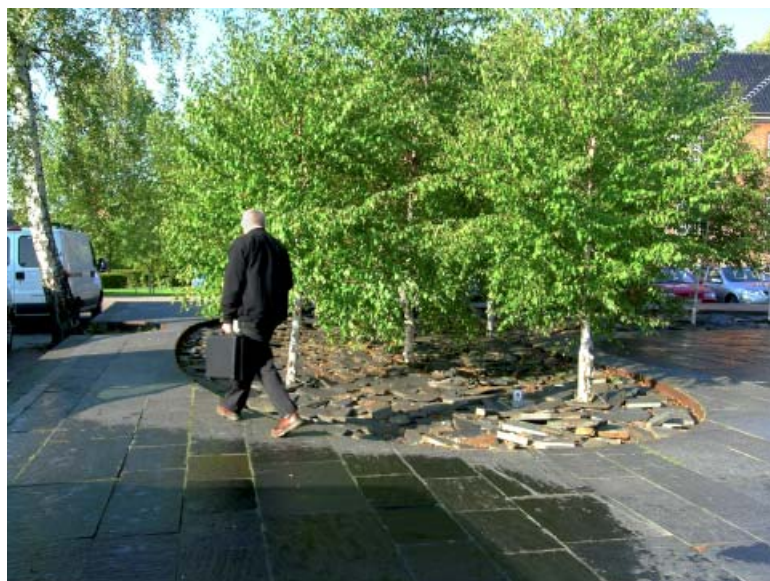


III. 1 Anchor Park Malmö: distributing differential sensations. Photo Michel Conan

¹ See Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible, esthétique et politique*, Paris: La fabrique, 2000

² Louis XIV, *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*, text edited by Simone Hoog, Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1992.

Only the absolutely unique form was worthy of esthetic contemplation. On the contrary in Stig Andersson's gardens, users' attention is called to the infinite variations produced by the interplay of his design, natural growth, meteorological phenomena—wind, rain, ice, snow, and users' interventions or random transformations by water jets, artificial light or sound. And each user builds in his memory a system of cues over which these variations are at play. At Ladegårdsparken in Holbæk, for instance, Andersson has planted sixteen hundred cherry trees of the five varieties that allow the longest blooming season in Denmark. This creates an infinite world of variations in the Spring, making the appearance of the whole neighborhood everywhere different at any hour, and ceaselessly changing as the days pass by. Other projects call attention to the play of different sensitive qualities: the small boulder rocks and the crushed oyster shells at Frederikssunds havneplads, or the variations of slight slopes in the cemetery of Assistens in Copenhagen. There, it is the sense of balance that is stimulated—a sense ignored in the Western world, and yet the most worthy of attention in some African countries since it embodies moral virtues. The same attention for slope is forced upon the attention of visitors to Glostrup town hall park, yet it is combined with the contrasts between the smooth and shiny surfaces of slate, the slightly rolling forms of grass slopes, and the roughly hewn forms of broken slates out of which trees seem to be growing. (ILL 2) Moreover, the categories of the natural and the artificial are ceaselessly put to question by the rambling gaze of users or visitors strolling in these garden sceneries: are the broken slates more or less natural than the grass lawn, is the gentle rolling lawn more or less natural than the smooth slate surface?



III 2: Glostrup Town Hall Park: passer-by intrigued by the soils in which the trees grow. Photo Michel Conan.

Yet the equivalence of natural and artificial materials is best evidenced in a very recent urban garden in Nørresundby (Aalborg.) Here one enters from the city on its northern side through a metal gangway that heaves deep groans, betraying its artificial nature, as one walks and enters into a garden path strewn with thousands of sea-shells that creak under the feet, betraying their natural frailty. (ILL 3) Visitors move along the path between parterres planted with grasses and trees that interlace with parterres of tarmac in which large carefully designed puddles—maintained with random jets of artificial mist when rain defaults—reflect the sky and the clouds. Some visitors are confused and, seeing the tarmac as more artificial than the sea-shell covered pathway, try to pursue their visit on its surface, discovering that the puddles force them to unexpected detours and lead them to places where they are exposed to being soaked by random water jets along their way, as if a garden could present visitors with artificial rain showers in lieu of statues or flowers.



III 3 Nørresundby Urban Garden: exchanging artifice, art, and nature in an infinite game. Photo SLA.

The spatial design of the gardens reflects Stig Andersson's attention for preparing a range of subtle sensual experiences. Yet this attention does not dictate the design. The sources of sensual experiences are scattered throughout the garden, each highlighted by some visual cue. And visitors are triggered by a few clearly marked paths and serpentine lines running through the design to explore the interlacing of the puzzle-like areas that make the garden surface. Andersson shares with Lawrence Halprin an interest in the movement of visitors and the creation of sensual experiences. However, while Halprin creates dramatic settings—mostly cascades gushing forth over cliffs of concrete, as in the FDR

memorial in Washington DC—and directs the movements of the crowd of visitors into an ever-changing choreography that sets the landscape into motion, Andersson aims at a larger range of experiences of motion calling upon landscape forms to stimulate personal flights of imaginary motion and a sense of duration that extends over several visits. This results in completely different garden forms. Far from Halprin's brutalism Andersson privileges undulating forms—calling to mind designs by Jean Arp, Wassily Kandinsky, and sometimes Roberto Burle Marx—that he overlays with objects or plants responding differently to the rhythm of meteorological changes over the year.



Ill 4 Charlotte Garden: moving along the lines of a puzzle (39) or (37) or (40) family crossing the garden by the lawn. Photo Michel Conan.

A window with a garden view over Charlottehaven or any of his residential gardens, invites gazing at different speeds over the puzzle of the garden's surfaces and attending to changes in texture with time of the year, weather, wind, and light. (ILL 4) As any public place, these gardens are also designed to allow their users to pursue the ritualized duties of everyday life: going to school, using the playground, running errands, walking the dog, taking a walk with friends or family. They call for the design of paths and spaces to provide various amenities. Andersson pays respect to function while avoiding the trapping of modernist functionalism because he is often called upon to remedy the muffled dramas that accrued from the social democrat politicians' embrace of modernist urban planning ideals. He sees both the personal comfort that results from a city endowed with a network of well-designed institutions and the esthetic qualities of many modernist spaces, as in Albertslund for instance. Yet he can also see the dulling impact of institutional power and of the disciplines of urban life at work, at

home, or in public encounters. His work pays respect to the disciplines of every day life in a Danish town by providing expected amenities and pedestrian paths throughout his gardens, but it always distances itself from a purely functional solution as if the location of his design resulted from the will of nature rather than from the demands of an institution.

In fact his gardens introduce a *rêverie* of the infinite extension and transformations of nature. This is not an echo of the post-modernist fascination with the sublime, but a new design esthetic conducive to engagement with nature and leading to communicative action. This deserves explanation.

Andersson's design approach embraces the diversity of city life dynamics. At Mølleparken in Aarhus, for instance, he acknowledges the historical transformation of the site and highlights the heterogeneity of the traces. Very much like Bernard Lassus' landscape approach at La Corderie Royale in Rochefort, he stresses the limits between different traces, and proposes an inflection of the dynamic course of historical changes in accordance to present concerns.³ Thus, they allow new practices to take place, and flights of individual imagination to make sense of them. This leads both of them to spurn the search for a balanced spatial composition or for a style in their design expression, and yet they achieve completely different results. Andersson's designs afford visitors a dream-like experience of the extension over time and space of nature. Ankarparken provides an illustration. The frames of surfaces, the canal, its winding embankment, the flat mosaic of interlocking patches of grass and reeds, and the idealized biotopes of Scandinavian wilderness seem to extend indefinitely beyond the limits they impose on the gaze of a pedestrian as if the buildings all around had recently encroached upon them. The paths encourage visitors to engage in a rambling discovery of its innumerable fragments, each evocative of personal memories of nature. The links—these strange sailing boards floating above ground—invite visitors to abandon the earth surface to explore a meandering path that leads into another world, a world of wild nature—oak or alder grove, swamp, or seaweed colony—suggesting abandonment to dreams of unfathomed depth as Gaston Bachelard has taught us.⁴ The garden does not offer a representation of the ascent of a mountain or the descent to a lake, but an abstracted experience of motion: a jump or two up or down, inviting a *rêverie* of vertical flight.⁵ (ILL 5) It moves the visitor from the real to the imaginary. Each visit contributes to an interlacing of these *rêveries* and everyday life, leaving the memory of a

³ Bernard Lassus, *The Landscape Approach*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998
Theory of Faults 62-64 and The Garden of Returns 131-140.

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves, Essai sur l'intuition de l'instant*, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1993

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les Songes, Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement*, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992

pleasurable sense of freedom. As visits go by, these memories weave into one another, and yet because no cultural meaning has been inscribed here, as opposed to classical, baroque, picturesque or ecological garden, visitors are confronted with two conundrums: what does this composition of curves, links and natural or artificial objects mean? And to whom is it addressed? Visitors who speak to one another to answer these questions create both the sense of place and their own identity as a group of urban dwellers on the move. This is how Stig Andersson's gardens renovate garden art and give a new life to Scandinavian cities.



III 5 Anchor Park, Malmö: inviting an imaginary flight into the wilderness. Photo Michel Conan.