PROJECT MUSE®

A Note on Adaptation in Gardens

John Dixon Hunt

Change Over Time, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 2012, pp. 188-200 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cot.2012.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/488319>

A NOTE ON ADAPTATION IN GARDENS

JOHN DIXON HUNT
University of Pennsylvania

Figure 1. The statue of Pan in the overgrown hedges at Rousham in the Vale of Venus. (John Dixon Hunt)

Adaptation in gardens is often different than adaption to buildings. Materials decay, ownership changes or new patrons have different ideas of how a landscape should look, private gardens are opened to the public, and even gardens may—without obvious formal alterations—be subjected to new interpretations. Examples adduced are the Tuileries, Rousham, Blenheim and Longleat.

Adaptations of gardens will not necessarily function as do adaptations of buildings or interiors. Nor does adaptation, as we recognize it in buildings, seem altogether similar to what we observe in landscape architecture, for while forms can be altered (topiary trees and bushes allowed to grow “naturally,” terraces smoothed into grass slopes), usage can also change without any deliberate intervention to reorganize its spaces. Even a building being adapted would mean that its function might have changed without its forms having been reorganized or even effected—I think of redundant churches in England that become theaters or community centers without any physical change to the fabric; yet, an Anglican liturgy and a performance of Noël Coward’s *Private Lives* would represent different experiences of the same space.

Adaptation of gardens will occur when the natural conditions and materials of land and topography are changed. These alterations may respond to changes in use—farmland becomes a garden or park; a steel mill becomes a public parkland; a private estate becomes a public amenity under the National Trust. The creation, in the nineteenth century, of New York’s Central Park or that of Buttes-Chaumont in Paris on wasteland, with squatters’ shacks, garbage dumps, or gallows for hanging of malefactors, was a radical adaptation of the existing ground.

Adaptations occur when funds for costly maintenance run out, or when funds are shifted to other activities; adaptations also occur when new money is acquired, and owners have the chance to display their new riches. In landscape architecture, the most obvious and widespread adaptations come as a result of changes in taste, the introduction of new ideas, as when (crudely speaking) the so-called “formal” garden of Europe in the Renaissance and seventeenth century was displaced by the “informal” world of “English” or “Picturesque” landscaping (none of these terms are without problems, but the conspicuous adaptation of a more natural look of gardens and parks during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is not to be gainsaid and was the result of deliberate adaptations of

sites). “Capability” Brown’s famed (or infamous) elimination of older, “formal” Dutch and French designs during the second half of the eighteenth century or the “Englishing” of the gardens of the Villa Borghese in Rome during the nineteenth century are both conspicuous adaptations. Yet often the introduction of these layouts into older gardens was accomplished not by the removal or displacement of the latter, but through new additions: Villa Borghese retained its *giardini segreti* beside the villa when the larger landscape was remodeled, and a common instinct on the continent was to welcome the new English style and simply attach it to an earlier layout.¹

A further set of adaptations occurs as a result of changes to a context rather than to the site itself: then perception of the place alters, its reception by visitors and other users shifts, and a new understanding of a place occurs even when the site itself does not sustain any substantial alteration. Sites can also assume a different function without particularly extensive or even visual alterations of form: the park of Duisburg-Nord by the designer Peter Latz (Latz + Partner) in Germany has done little to change the former steel works, beyond introducing a few gardens in the derelict bunkers and a set of steel plates to provide an amphitheater for performances of music and plays within the massive redundant fabric. Yet it now is a parkland, with climbing and swimming taking place on walls and inside storage tanks, where folk can picnic and walk and admire the colossal chimney and railways, and even recognize that certain remains are (without any modification) sculptural effects in the parkland.

One of the most common occurrences for older garden layouts, some perhaps justly famous, is when their surroundings alter but they do not. Sites can simply be surrounded by suburban or urban growth and, while the site itself may have been miraculously preserved as originally designed and laid out, it can no longer remain the same: the context is altered, though the place itself isn’t. Anyone who has flown into London’s Heathrow Airport from the east will pass over several gardens, notably Lord Burlington’s Chiswick House, now marooned as an oasis within suburbia and cheek by jowl with the adjacent M4 motorway that goes out to Heathrow. Chiswick has certainly been changed and augmented over the years,² but it still retains an essential aura; yet approaching it through surrounding suburbs or from the adjacent motorway does somewhat alter, phenomenologically, how we receive it. Its ultimate Italian model, Palladio’s Villa Rotunda, while still preserving its hilltop sanctuary, is also slowly being surrounded with the extensions of the neighboring town of Vicenza, as London encroaching like rust upon the pastoral retreat of E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*.

Other adaptations in gardens occur casually, by neglect or outright destruction; these are simple changes. Gardens decay—for as Tennyson says, “things decay and fall, and after many a summer dies the swan” (though swans may not live any longer than parterres, terraces, trees, and view sheds).³ Some gardens totally vanish in the undergrowth, their bones left to be identified archaeologically. Furthermore, even plants that do survive will grow and alter their physical presence in the landscape: the growth of trees and plants is wholly natural, though they can be trimmed and shaped; but when, for example, hedges

that stood behind statues outgrow their original form, they become enclosures, or alcoves, around the sculpture and subtly change how we see them (Fig. 1).

For a review of these various kinds of adaptation, two gardens in particular may best be useful: Tuileries, in Paris, and Rousham, near Oxford in England. The former has been erased and scraped over five centuries, leaving a mere token of what once was a famous garden: the challenge, then, is to ask what adaptations of the space will ensure a longer and more exciting life. Rousham is different—an estate since the sixteenth century, its layout has remained topographically the same, with only two interventions, by Charles Bridgeman in the 1720s and William Kent in 1739. Wear and tear apart, these adaptations have not much altered the site overall, yet how those two designers rethought and adapted Rousham's gardens matters considerably.

The Tuileries was an ancient garden adjacent to the Louvre. It underwent a variety of changes from the seventeenth century onward, largely implemented to respond to changes of taste and public usage; it finally lost much sense of purpose and ceased to be the remarkable garden it had been before, under André Le Nôtre or during the nineteenth century when it was much celebrated by Impressionist painters. The French government decided to hold a competition to make the site more prepossessing, while reaffirming its prominence beside the Louvre, the courtyard of which had recently received a striking pyramid by I. M. Pei.

In 1990 the French landscape architect, Bernard Lassus, entered the competition to remake the Tuileries site, and he recognized that since it had been successively revamped and reorganized since the seventeenth century, it was essentially a palimpsest of gardens.⁴ Rather than proposing either a garden recreation of one of the historical layers or of creating a wholly modern garden, he proposed registering the different levels of the ground to recall the work of earlier designers. Five layers were proposed—the garden dedicated to the Médici would be 80 centimeters below grade, Claude Mollet's 20 centimeters below grade, Le Nôtre's at current grade, a nineteenth-century element at 50 centimeters above grade, and at 170 centimeters, a contemporary garden of ponds alongside the River Seine (Figs. 2 and 3). The nineteenth century and Le Nôtorean gardens would be "restored," those of the Médici "rehabilitated," and the Mollet segment "reinvented"; the final contemporary insertion was Lassus's own. Less restoration than an adaptation of how the site could have been "seen" at different periods, it offered an imaginative record of history adapted for a famous site that had lost its integrity. The result would have been both a new garden and a chance for visitors to understand its history.

Lassus also engineered a new axis from I. M. Pei's pyramid in the Louvre courtyard that lay at a somewhat awkward angle to the Tuileries: he used his new version of the Tuileries to turn and align the axis based in the pyramid with one that is now focused on the Arc du Carrousel, the Arc de Triomphe beyond, and ultimately upon the arch at La Défense. Nothing in the larger view was changed, but the rethinking and reshaping of that axis would have adapted how we experienced the site and its larger situation in Paris. And it also would have made sense of the new garden in the vicinity of the Louvre courtyard as well as of the palimpsestic nature of this particular site.

Figure 2. Bernard Lassus, plan of his reconstruction of the Tuileries. (Bernard Lassus)

Rousham, near Oxford, presents a variety of adaptations: on the one hand it has stayed in the same family since the sixteenth century, yet it was owned by people who sometimes lived elsewhere in other properties and did not visit it or maybe even value its design. The original estate, largely agricultural, was adapted at first by Charles Bridgeman in the 1720s to make a small and distinguished garden. He smoothed out what appear (on an estate map) to be little terraces on the river bank to make a grass slope, then created rectangular pools of water down what was termed the Vale of Venus, and installed a theater by the river: this was a baroque structure of grassed levels and ramps. Rousham was then responding to new ideas of European gardening, mainly French. When, in 1739, William Kent arrived, new adaptations were inserted and his work there became a hallmark of the new “English” garden style. The baroque theater was removed and replaced by a simple grass exedra, with three statues at either side and the rear, resulting in much more natural scenery, though still gesturing to its “theatrical” potential.⁵ He also, in a

Figure 3. Bernard Lassus, extended vista of the Tuileries. (Bernard Lassus)

similar vein, modified the Venus pools to give them a less rectilinear format. Across the little valley that descended to the river from the ridge above, Kent built the Praeneste Terrace (Fig. 4), a diminished version of something he had seen at Palestrina in Italy. He relocated some of General Dormer's collection of statues around the grounds, and—probably most importantly of all—he located or adapted objects outside the garden in the surrounding meadow and on the far hillside: a nearby mill was given a *gothick* aspect (buttresses and battlements), and a distant triumphal arch, also in *gothick* form, to celebrate the owner, General Dormer, who had fought at the Battle of Blenheim. In these maneuvers he was following his friend, Alexander Pope's admonition to “call in the country,” and essentially to blend the far landscape that was out of the control of the gardener with what was near and within its bounds. This was precisely the “master stroke” that Horace Walpole claimed for Kent, once he had visited Rousham in 1760; it was an invocation of the English countryside as part of the garden, a new vision of what Walpole called “prospect, animated prospect,” seen over the ha-ha and with a view beyond: “the leading step to all that has followed, was . . . the destruction of walls for boundaries, and the invention of fosses” (i.e., the ha-ha).⁶

These modifications by Kent allowed the bones of Bridgeman's gardens to remain, augmented now with several reminiscences of Italy (as opposed to France)—sculptures, the Praeneste arcade (with Kent's handsome seats inside, from which the visitor could look across the river and the water meadows), and some jetting fountains in the Vale of Venus, which Kent recorded in a well-known sketch (the plumbing still apparently exists,

but is unusable at present without restoration⁷). What Kent also added was a new kind of planting, “Oaks, Elms, Beach, Alder, plains [?plane trees] and Horsechestnuts,” with an understory of planting. This has long since disappeared, but it was all recorded by the steward, Cleary, as “deferent sort of Flowers, peering through the deferent sorts of Evergreens, here you think the Laurel produces the Rose. The Holly a Syringa, the Yew a Lilac and the sweet Honeysuckle is peering out from under every Leafe.”⁸ This new design feature—the underplanting and shrubbery—would acquire great popularity in the later eighteenth century and caused the adapting of much garden planting throughout England.⁹

That Rousham has remained today as it was after Kent’s intervention, even without the detailed planting that has not altogether survived, is something of a miracle. “Capability” Brown was busy at Stowe to the north and at Blenheim to the south, but Rousham survived any Brownian reformulation. This may in part be due to the absent owners, whose apparently lengthy absence in 1760 was mildly rebuked by the steward.¹⁰ A major storm severely damaged the place in the 1980s and left, for example, a thickly wooded yew grove decimated. But Kent’s views out across the River Cherwell, on which he worked by modifying a mill (the Temple of the Mill) and an “Eyecatcher” have survived. The views out are fabulous and exactly as Kent envisaged. A nearby American air base, while invisible, still sends its planes off to European war zones over the gardens, and the sound of their engines disturbs the countryside (but can happily be rescinded when the parish church has a wedding or service!). The one challenge has been a local farmer who wanted to erect

Figure 4. The Praeneste Terrace, Rousham, by William Kent. (John Dixon Hunt)

an industrial farm shed on the skyline beside Kent's famous "Eyecatcher"; his request has been turned down on several occasions (I was one of those who wrote to the local planning board to protest), so that particular addition or adaption of the view has been happily frustrated (for the moment, maybe).

Rousham was extremely lucky to stay in the Dormer, now Cottrell-Dormer, family for five centuries. Its adaptations therefore cleaved to new ideas of early English eighteenth-century garden-making without pushing a radically new agenda.¹¹ But fashionable reworking of land by Brown and others, undertaken by new generations in a family, or when the property was sold to another, was widespread. Doubtless these may have been promoted less by fervor for a new design aesthetic than by the contemporaneous move for land enclosure, or by the need to reduce maintenance on an old-fashioned layout. Nonetheless, eighteenth-century England saw a huge alteration in country seats, which in turn modifies how they were used by their owners and, above all, seen (or received) by visitors. Longleat, in Wiltshire, for example, had a famous seventeenth-century garden (Figs. 5 and 6); it was largely swept away by Brown to lay out a spread on the large hillside and meadows that rose to meet the old summit, "Heaven's Gate"; this ruthless adaption to accommodate the new taste of course pleased and pleases those who delight in the "English" or "Picturesque" landscape. Blenheim, too, was more subtly modified by Brown when he adapted the level of the lake as to submerge half of John Vanbrugh's *brobdignagian* bridge, which thereby allowed the valley to assume a more relaxed and pastoral tone (Fig. 7).

The most visible and remarked alterations in gardens occurred, then, because tastes in garden design change, for a variety of reasons that need not concern this discussion and are anyway well known. They were the more apparent because their newfangledness was much trumpeted and its vogue was apparent throughout the western hemisphere, but it can be appreciated best where it has been studied and some would say "invented" (such was Walpole's argument): England. The so-called "English," "Picturesque," or sometimes awkwardly termed "informal" organizations replaced "formal" ones. (This wholly begs the question as to whether the designs by "Capability" Brown that adapted earlier work by Charles Bridgeman and William Kent did not equally display and delight with different formal effects.)

Change may occur suddenly, and whole layouts are reformulated, if not overnight, at least very quickly; labor was no obstacle on large estates with huge workforces. Sometimes the newer ideas are inserted into an older site, which then gradually gets altered as additional elements are introduced, or as the older segments fall into decay. But never did taste change evenly across a generation, and many estates refused to make these adaptations, and there were hold-outs throughout the land, which Tom Williamson has chronicled.¹² Money played a part, as did changes of ownership, or an owner owning another property that he preferred, as well as conservatives who clung to earlier gardenist regimes; so did landowners, who showed more interest in the larger agricultural estate where the garden itself played a less significant role.

Garden alterations take many forms: insertions of new buildings (temples, *fabriques*),

Figure 5. Engraving of the gardens at Longleat from c.1704. (Author's private collection)

the display of statuary, of calling in the country, even of features like terracing and parterres (which were resumed in the nineteenth century when tastes changed again) can make the site a wholly different place to view and visit. Yet the topography may remain much as before, and even—with these new adaptations—be more responsive to the site. While this is not a piece about conservation of gardens, how certain adaptations have modified how we now see or understand the place can be crucial. Some adaptations that fail to touch physically the gardens themselves are, however, the most insidious: namely, what people write about them changes how we may view them. Again, Rousham may provide a useful, final, example.

This garden has always been a hidden gem, midway between Blenheim and Stowe and less visited than them, and still in private hands (no National Trust interventions, no tearoom, dogs are welcome, but young children are not). While being the only surviving example of Kent's gardening and therefore something of a treasure, only the aficionados know of it, and thus it has perhaps preserved its aura. Yet it also elicits, because of its rarity and quality, a series of often strange commentaries. If the first sustained modern inquiry into the Rousham garden was the work of a distinguished landscape architect, carefully describing and identifying its physical shape and materials,¹³ later "interpretations" have not been so reticent.

Partly as a result of garden history being, in the last thirty years, largely the province of art historians or literary critics, Rousham has acquired a bibliography where both approaches are evident. David Coffin, an expert on Italian architecture and garden-making,

Figure 6. Modern view of Longleat from the top of the hill depicted in Fig. 5. (John Dixon Hunt)

brought his own Italianate skills to bear upon Rousham (actually forgetting how Kent's great love had been his years in Italy and how what he achieved in Oxfordshire may have been due to his skill in adapting Italian items and ideas to an English countryside);¹⁴ among literary historians, James Turner, Patrick Eyres, Simon Pugh, and I have also intervened with our own interpretations, finding in verbal associations and allusions a key to the meaning of the place.¹⁵ Such interpretations do not harm the site; nor do they alter it physically. But the changes of our reception of the garden over recent time do alter how we see it, which may or may not have consequences for its future maintenance; at best they may sidetrack some of our concerns with its overall importance. They intervene with their own explanations and interpretations of the found materials and even layout. Since both art historians and literary historians are always eager to comment on specific elements of the place—statues (especially sculptural copies of Roman items), the Praeneste Terrace, a pyramid, and a cluster of iconographical issues and literary references—all come in for commentary and are pulled into various interpretations of the whole. Yet what they all miss are precisely the things that receive no interpretation or commentary: what I would call the “places in between.”

Landscapes are particularly prone to adaptations in reception, as cultures or even individuals change and their interests vary. Which perhaps means that we need to be more aware of how we look at garden adaptations. Northrop Frye's literary proposal about understanding a play asks us to accept that our “progress in grasping the meaning is a progress, not in seeing more *in* the play, but in seeing more *of* it” (my italics).¹⁶ It is

Figure 7. The bridge and lake at Blenheim, obscuring half of Vanbrugh's bridge and raising the lake in the valley. (Emily T. Cooperman)

sometimes easier to study garden history as a narrative of set routes, iconography, and literary references, not least because they allow us to grasp the meaning of a place like Rousham, especially when we are not there; but that tends to focus only on key or inserted items. These may certainly determine how we respond and interpret the site. But Ian Hamilton Finlay has also called attention to “a lot of rhetorical space *between* the individual features” of a garden.¹⁷ So at Rousham, while the formal items certainly encourage new responses to the site, a visit there is also about the whole place, walking and thinking *between* the items that get attention, *between* the adaptations, the interstices of the place: the views beyond the river, the country road and its long bridge over the river meadows, the sloping valleys, the groves and undulating ground, and the surrounding estate. For the most part, these were all there originally. But what Bridgeman and then Kent seem to have done was, beyond involving these features, as well as adding items in their different adaptations, to reveal to us how we might envisage the whole place. And this is what the steward, McCleary, was able to grasp: the essential rural ambience of Rousham. He saw that beyond the garden were “five pretty Country Villages” and a “pretty Corn Mill,” meadows with “all sorts of cattle feeding, which looks the same as if they were feeding in the Garden.” Within the estate itself he notices a paddock stocked with “two fine Cows, two Black Sows, a Bore, and a Jack Ass,” “as pretty a sett of pig Stighs as aney is in England,” kitchen and flower gardens where the fruit is lovingly detailed, fishponds, a dairy yard,

and the church.¹⁸ *Mutatis mutandis* these elements are still all there today, and the adjacent farmyard still very much in use. Invoked by McCleary, as before him (we must assume) by Bridgeman and Kent, these necessary adjuncts or insertions instruct us in how to perceive the gardens at Rousham as a whole—both its original topographical forms, its insertions by designers, the long processes of temporal change (tree growth or storms), and by the surrounding visibility of what we still need to observe alongside these other adaptations.

References

1. Two examples of this are demonstrated in John Dixon Hunt, *The Picturesque Garden in Europe* (London, 2002), figures 85 (for France) and 122 (for Sweden).
2. The full details of Chiswick are set out in John Harris, *The Palladian Revival. Lord Burlington, His Villa and Garden at Chiswick* (New Haven & London, 1994). A final brief chapter deals with “Chiswick after 1740,” but later, contemporary additions and alterations are not taken up at that date.
3. The lines are from his poem on “Tithonus,” who was granted eternal life but failed to ask for eternal youth, therefore he got increasingly and endlessly older.
4. His design did not win the *concours*, but the results of his work were published in a small booklet, *Le Jardin des Tuileries de Bernard Lassus* (London: The Coracle Press, 1991), with eleven short essays by various commentators and designers.
5. These changes are illustrated and discussed in Chapter 11 of my *A World of Gardens* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).
6. Horace Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1771, reprint; New York, 1995), 42. The celebration of “prospects,” forgetting that it was much invoked in Italy, comes on pp. 53–54.
7. The drawing is variously reproduced. But see John Dixon Hunt, *William Kent. Landscape Garden Designer. An Assessment and Catalogue of His Designs* (London, 1987), cat. no. 105.
8. See details of Cleary’s letter in note 10: his spelling was a touch wobbly.
9. Mark Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden. English Pleasure Grounds 1720–1800* (Philadelphia, 1999), specifically 42–43.
10. The steward’s letter was first published by Mavis Batey, “The Way to View Rousham by Kent’s Gardener,” *Garden History* 11, no. 2 (1983): 125–32, and then dated 1750. The current owners, Mr. and Mrs. Cottrell-Dormer, have now established that the date is 1760. This perhaps makes more understandable Cleary’s lament for their long absence since Kent did the work in 1739–49. See Mavis Batey, “Turn Your Face towards Rousham,” *Garden History Society Newsletter* 88 (Summer 2011): 17.
11. But nor did Rousham get changed in the nineteenth century, when it could have been adapted to suit Victorian tastes.
12. Tom Williamson has discussed this in various books on East Anglian estates, where the incident of conservative gardening seems considerable. See in particular Tom William and Liz Bellamy, *Property & Landscape. A Social History of Land Ownership and the English Countryside* (Frome and London, 1987), chapters 6 and 7.
13. Hal Moggridge, “Notes on Kent’s Garden at Rousham,” *Journal of Garden History* 6 (1896): 187–226. This is the fullest description of the garden, with maps of routes, viewsheds, and a photographic catalogue of every item on the site; the basic place to start, if you have not been there.
14. David R. Coffin, “The Elysian Fields of Rousham,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 130 (1986), 406–23, republished in his *Magnificent Buildings, Splendid Gardens* (Princeton, N.J., 2008), 218–31.
15. Simon Pugh, “Nature as Garden,” *Studio International*, 186 (October 1973): 121–25; James G. Turner, “The Sexual Politics of Landscape: Images of Venus in 18th-Century English Poetry and Gardening,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 11 (1982): 343–66; Patrick Eyres, “Garden of Apollo and Venus,” *New Arcadians* 19 (1984); and D. R. Coffin’s “Venus in the 18th-Century English Garden,” *Garden History* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 232–49. John Dixon Hunt’s “Verbal Versus Visual Meanings: The Case of Rousham” was published in *Garden History. Issues, Approaches, Methods*, ed. John Dixon Hunt

(Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 151–81; this includes a list of various publications on Rousham.

16. *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965), in *Northrop Frye's Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, ed. Troni Grange and Garry Sherbert (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 199.
17. Quoted by Finlay in his interview with Udo Weilacher, *Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art* (Berlin and Basel, 1996), 102. My italics.
18. See Mavis Batey (note 10 above), pp. 128–31.