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The 20th century Grates:
“CHRISTOPHER TUNNARD”

Landscape History and Theory

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CHRISTOPHER TUNNARD

Christopher Tunnard was born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1910, died in 1979. He received his advanced education at University of British Columbia and later at the College of the Royal Horticultural Society at Wisley, and the Westminster Technical Institute, England. From 1932 to 1935, he was a site planner in the London office of Percy S. Cane, one of the pre-eminent garden designers in the tradition of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens. With Cane he seems to have shared an admiration for Japanese design and disdain for the lack of 'good taste' in Victorian gardens. In 1936, he initiated his own practice of landscape architecture in London.

Tunnard the Modernist

Tunnard was the first British author to urge a connection between modern art and garden design. Tunnard and the Belgian landscape architect Jean Caneel-Claes wrote a manifesto in 1937: 'We believe in the probity of the creative act . . . the reliance of the designer on his own knowledge and experience and not on the academic symbolism of the styles or outworn systems of aesthetics, to create by experiment and invention new forms which are significant of the age from which they spring'.

In 1937 he began his landscape series in *Architectural Review*. The approaches were taken variously from art, architecture and Percy Cane's practice. The stance of his writings betrayed his own lack of clarity or direction. On the one hand a strictly Modernist position dictating a rejection of the past, and on the other, an affinity for landscape design history. This imprint of architectural ideas combined with interest in design history had significant consequences for Tunnard's influential work. Perhaps the Wisley training or, the acquisition of an eighteenth-century country house amid a landscape garden for both his own dwelling and design experimentation, may account for the ambiguous narrative of landscape design history.

Gardens in the Modern Landscape

In 1938 he published the *Gardens in the Modern Landscape*. It became an important textbook, often referred to by garden designers trained in the 1950s as 'the only book we had'. Tunnard opened with the assertion 'A garden is a work of art' and soon revealed himself as a true disciple of the modern movement. The strident Modernist stance of the first edition was a product not only of the author's youthful and rebellious zeal, but also of the intellectual climate of British Modernism in the 1930s. Attacking the 'gaudy botch' of the Victorian garden, Tunnard urged for a modern house that requires modern surroundings. His point

was well made by a photograph of a modern house in Northampton, by Peter Berhens, which looks most uncomfortable perched on top of a Jekyllesque dry stone wall and a semi-circular flight of steps which 'fail entirely to harmonize with the character of the house'. The basic steps to be followed for the new garden should be: attention to the honesty of materials, the use of the best materials in non-representational, geometric forms and functional space expressed continuously from the interior of the building to the landscape would move landscape architecture away from fussy ornaments.

He demonstrated his thoughts about the modern gardens with gardens that he had designed until 1937. St Anne's Cobham and the Bentley Wood were the most important of them. In Bentley Wood, also known as 'The House at Halland', Christopher Tunnard grasped contemporary meaning by inserting a Henry Moor sculpture (now removed) at a crucial point. The architect, Serge Chermeyeff owned the house. It was an austere beautiful and entirely modern design, with sweeping curves, orthogonal geometry near house and then informal. This house became the crystal symbol of a new faith for British garden designers.

St. Anne's Cobham on St Ann's Hill in Surrey, Chertsey was an 18th century landscape garden designed by Charles Hamilton, containing some magnificent trees and shrubbery from the 19th century, which were retained as the main structuring devices. The new house, designed by Raymond McGrath, provided expansive views over the landscape garden through large glass windows. The terraces adjoining the house were treated as extensions of the interior spaces. Christopher Tunnard designed the garden for himself. The original Reptonian sensibilities of the place, including the approach to the house, were completely obscured or substantially altered by the new construction. The terrace surrounded a shallow reflecting pool, terminated by a Willi Soukop sculpture floating in a smaller pool. The whole terrace was marked at its edge by a concrete wing wall that framed views, making this a boundary between the house and the landscape. Floating beyond the house, a concrete swimming pool, nestled in sloping terrain embracing a mass of mature rhododendron.

Approaches to the new technique

In *Gardens in the Modern Landscape*, Tunnard postulated three approaches to 'a new technique' for twentieth-century gardens: 1. The functional, an approach based on the concept that use determined form taken directly from the Modern Movement in architecture; 2. The empathic, based on Japanese-inspired attitudes toward nature expressed symbolically in asymmetrical composition; and 3. the artistic, based on principles of Modern art the conception that a garden should be, a work of art.

Tunnard, claimed that what both the nineteenth and eighteenth century gardeners had in common was the desire to make pictures. He attempted himself to create space around buildings. He argued for a stripped-down functional style, which takes the needs of users as its departure point. Though he does not suggest that the people should be advised.

Tunnard cites Adolph Loos and Le Corbusier in his initial attack on the academic styles, and promotes 'fitness for purpose' as the touchstone for a new kind

of landscape architecture. Although he liked Le Cobursier, he did not see what function the ground would have around his buildings. He preferred levelled meadows, turned into recreation grounds and trees used as barriers for traffic isolation, green belts, along residential streets or for recreation than obscuring architectural masterpieces in a sentimental way.

Japanese design appealed to Modernists in its simplicity and functionalism. Tunnard notes that the Japanese come at the beautiful by the way of the necessary, able to imbue even the most ordinary everyday objects with a spiritual quality. He found the Principle of 'Occult balance' in which dissimilar objects can be counter-balanced in an asymmetrical design. In oriental religions such as Shinto and Buddhism he discovered a sense of personal identification with Nature. He called this 'empathetic attitude' and reflected in unity between house and garden Tunnard suggested (compatibly with the more humanistic theories within environmental ethics) that the antagonistic attitude towards nature, should be abandoned, nature is not to be copied or sentimentalised, neither overridden.

Tunnard's thinking is more convoluted when he comes to consider his third influence, modern abstract art. In places his opinions seem very close to those of Geoffrey Jellicoe in that he would like to re-establish gardening as an art form. He suggests that most gardens ornament whether in the form of Italian stone benches or, florid wrought iron gates, is anachronistic and should be removed. However, he does not seem able to embrace a vigorously functional aesthetic, which might have no place for works of modern art as embellishment.

A new era; USA and transformation of believes

But in the British Isles, Modern Gardens had scarcely enjoyed a life. The public gave every appearance of having looked at Tunnard's photograph of the Behrens house in an 'old world' garden and decided the garden was charming but the house an abomination. Nor had professional designers shown much enthusiasm for the style. He was invited by Gropius to teach at the Harvard University. In his transition to the USA and the discipline of planning, the MARS planning effort was very influential.

The MARS plan for London was guided by Marxist planner, Arthur Korn, and Max Fry, architect, with a team that included Tunnard and Elizabeth Denby. The plan conceptualised the rehousing and growth of the city in large mixed developments that were dominated by Ville-Radieuse type flats. Also, before leaving England, Tunnard was involved with the 'Ideal Home Exhibition'. This was a development of twenty dwelling units per acre, with private gardens abutting a common green spine amid the rows. The social ideals of the project contributed significantly to the expansion of Tunnard's range of experience beyond the scale of the garden.

Tunnard at the GSD was teaching Site Planning and landscape history about the nineteenth-century precedents for Modernism. Among his students during the four years at Harvard were Lawrence Halprin, Edward Larrabee Barnes, Willo Moltke,

and Philip Johnson. However, Harvard's Departments of Architecture and Landscape Architecture were fundamentally separate: the one dominated by the Bauhaus refugees, the other by neo-classicist devotees of Italian villa gardens.

This disparity of mission undoubtedly added to Tunnard's unsettled attitudes toward landscape architecture. Both professional and personal concerns pressed him closely at this time. The reception of his work in the American professional magazine, *Landscape Architecture Quarterly*, was less than warm; he also coped with a number of difficult family matters including his father's death in the late 1930s. In 1943, he was drafted into the Royal Canadian Air Force, made worse by the loss of one eye during his service. He was briefly married during the later war years. After returning to the USA he was briefly editor of *The Architectural Forum*. In 1945, he remarried and began teaching at Yale, where he was attracted by the city planning history, and, specifically, the history of classicism in design.

The second edition of *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* was published in 1948. In the foreword, he cut a wide, critical swathe through contemporary architecture and planning. He attacked the 'mannerist' Modernism, the presumed social superiority of Modern style, with the 'metaphysical' and 'organic' approaches, and the unthinking practitioners who had undermined the movement. He wrote: 'creative art has a firmer foundation when based on the accumulation of knowledge rather than on intuitiveness alone, the nineteenth century revivals were not always mere essays in copyist, but also productive of entirely new forms and expressions'. The attitude of hasty condemnation gave way to one of considerable respect.

His second major published work, *The City of Man*, appeared in 1953. It is a substantial historical treatment of American urbanism that includes a didactic, anti-Radiant city analysis entitled the 'City of Shadows'.

With the advent of the golden age of highway engineering, engineers had funding to build and design without regard for the social or aesthetic consequences of their projects. In response to this belligerent state, Tunnard formed the Joint Program at Yale University in 1957. This spirit of cross-disciplinary collaboration in planning and design was characteristic of the Bauhaus and of related Modernist approaches in Britain. Its purpose was to educate highway engineering practitioners in the ways of city planning, instilling aesthetic and social sensibilities. Other professors in the programme were Paul Davidoff, Britton Harris, Alan Altshuler. The Program combined the Faculty of City Planning in the School of Art and Architecture, and the Faculty of the Bureau of Highway Traffic Institute. Tunnard was instrumental in the formative years of the program, and he continued to provide leadership until the program's demise in 1969.

Tunnard; an influential but ambiguous presence of Modern Times

Tunnard's teaching, and writings in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s had significant repercussions for a wholly new (in the USA) attitude toward historic preservation

in the context of city planning. His books and his teaching of preservation courses at Yale in these decades propelled him as one of the progenitors of the International Committee on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and as a founder of the New Haven historic preservation commission. Thereby he was identified with conservation-oriented attitudes toward city revitalisation that were antithetical to the Modern Movement.

Tunnard's works and especially his book have made significant marks on landscape architecture and other design and planning disciplines. While arguably contributing to a general vitality, they have also contributed to confusion in landscape architecture. For some the legacy has been the strident Modernism; for others the ambivalent reconsiderations. The chronicle of his personal re-examination of Modernism offers insight not only into Tunnard's changing directions but also into the changing nature of the disciplines of landscape architecture, city planning and architecture in the period from 1930 to 1950.