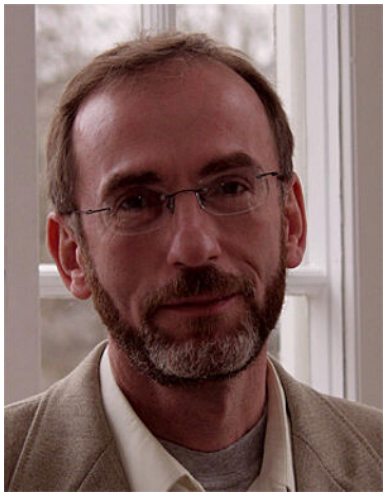

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Theory of Architecture

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PROJECT

The History and Theory of Garden Planning

COLLOQUIUM, 05.05.2003

The Beauty-Free Shop
Or: Yet Another Search for Utopia. Gardens as Architecture

This quest is bound to be a utopian one: a place like the Beauty-Free Shop cannot exist, and for many a reason: firstly, there is no place on Earth that could be without beauty. Like some King Midas, we cannot help seeing things as beautiful - in the sense that even deliberately produced ugliness would be evaluated in aesthetic terms and would acquire cultural meaning. It has the best chance to sooner or later end up by being perceived as "beautiful" in some way. Secondly, research on gardens is always under the sign of nostalgia for the Paradise lost; no retrieved garden will truly match the primeval one and all landscape, be it the shabbiest, cannot but represent some decayed stage of Eden. Thirdly, while usually being put together by specialists, gardens do not belong, theoretically speaking, to any discipline in particular. Any knowledge, from geography, physics and ethology to botany, anthropology and philosophy will have a part in theorising on gardens, yet no one will claim ultimate authority in the matter.

The approach here is motivated by the overpowering aestheticism of our times. Aesthetic projects should necessarily have their limitations: they ought to remain relevant exclusively in the realm of the arts. They only concern artefacts. However, the aesthetic discourse ceaselessly forces its specific barriers. Of course architecture is an art, yet one different by its nature, as it has a strong functional or utilitarian component. Thus the excess of aesthetics in architecture comes at the expense of its other, more trivial half of no lesser importance. Quite differently, garden design - even when dealing with a place destined for sacred or vegetable purposes - has indeed had at all times a wider conceptual freedom in shaping its forms. Since the failure of the most recent historical attempt to establish an architectural canon - namely functionalism - architecture has in vain tried to pull itself together; as a result of its stylistic fragmentation, nowadays it has become common for an architect to declare his complete creative freedom. Hence it seems appropriate from the methodological point of view to take a roundabout through garden theory in order to venture more safely in the uncertain territory of the aesthetics of architecture.

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