



## John Dixon Hunt

### Professor Emeritus

[jdhunt@design.upenn.edu](mailto:jdhunt@design.upenn.edu)

#### Biography

B.A. and M.A., King's College, Cambridge (1957)

Ph.D., Bristol University (1964)

Professor John Dixon Hunt joined the faculty in 1994 and served as department chair through June 2000. He was the former Director of Studies in Landscape Architecture at Dumbarton Oaks. He is the author of numerous articles and books on garden history and theory, including a catalogue of the landscape drawings of William Kent, *Garden and Grove*, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, *The Picturesque Garden in Europe* (2002), *The Afterlife of Gardens* (2004), and *A World of Gardens* (2012). He edited the journal *Word & Image* from 1985-2010 and currently edits *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*. Current interests focus upon landscape architectural theory, the development of garden design in the city of Venice, modern(ist) garden design, and ekphrasis. He is the inaugural series editor of the *Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture* (University of Pennsylvania Press), in which was published his own theoretic study of landscape architecture, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (1999). In May 2000 he was named Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture, and he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Bristol (UK) in 2006.

In 2010, the [John Dixon Hunt Fund](#) was established to honor the contributions of Professor Emeritus John Dixon Hunt.



**THE MAKING  
OF PLACE  
MODERN AND  
CONTEMPORARY  
GARDENS**  
JOHN DIXON HUNT

say that the horticultural plenitude of gardens and their plants was to become a distinctive feature of modern gardens for more than just the elite and the powerful.

There are two kinds of gardeners' gardens: those that are created by their owners, and those for which owners seek expert help. The former rely on a multitude of ideas and elicit an astonishing variety of possibilities, which veer from exciting and eccentric to ordinary and from pretentious to low-key, but always (one must assume) to the satisfaction of the owner or for others to see and (presumably) admire. There is something about owner-created or owner-inspired gardens: 'I think most people feel that what anyone does on their own land is up to them so long as it affects no one else.'<sup>3</sup> But affecting others is surely part of the game, and many look enviously upon their neighbours' gardens. It is not for nothing that the UK has the 'Yellow Book', in which hundreds of gardens are listed and opened to the public for a few days each year and where owners cherish and cultivate their gardens to the perfection that opening day requires (this is a bourgeois version of those Elizabethan nobility and gentry who would hold back their flowers and fruits for the days on which the Queen was due to be fêted). The American Garden Conservancy also sponsors similar private openings, and an announcement for one in Philadelphia during May 2013 boasted the longevity of gardening owners, the often small scale of their gardens, skill with 'color preferences', woody plants, specimen trees, a thousand daffodils, flowers to encourage birds and butterflies,

and children's playhouses. In order to keep up with the folk on the other side of the garden wall or fence there is useful information on the internet from such organizations as the London College of Garden Design, the Garden Industry Manufacturer's Association and the Horticultural Trades Association or the Federation of Garden & Leisure Manufacturers (equivalents outside the UK provide the same services). People in Britain spend huge sums during their lifetimes on everything from tools and electric machinery to sheds, greenhouses and garden furniture.

There is also a mass of advice in gardening journals, posh newspaper articles and glossy books with titles like *The Perfect Country Garden*, *Garden Magic* or *Dream Gardens of England* that flatter us with the latest design or PR jargon and dazzle us with glossy images. These photographs rarely show any occupants (I suppose people would mess up the perfection of the garden setting); they are always static (though the photographer cannot help *that*) and reveal little of how the site has been responded to, where it is, or how it is used (full-time residence, holiday home, weekend retreat). Gardens created by professionals for their owners may often lack individuality. While it is extremely hard to gainsay any particular place-making, there is little capacity in the available literature and imagery to adjudicate taste.

Anne Cauquelin's *Petit Traité de jardin ordinaire* (2003) provides a grammar and lexicon for 'ordinary' gardens and lists the necessary activities to sustain them and the 'accessories' that enhance them. Nothing here is very surprising:

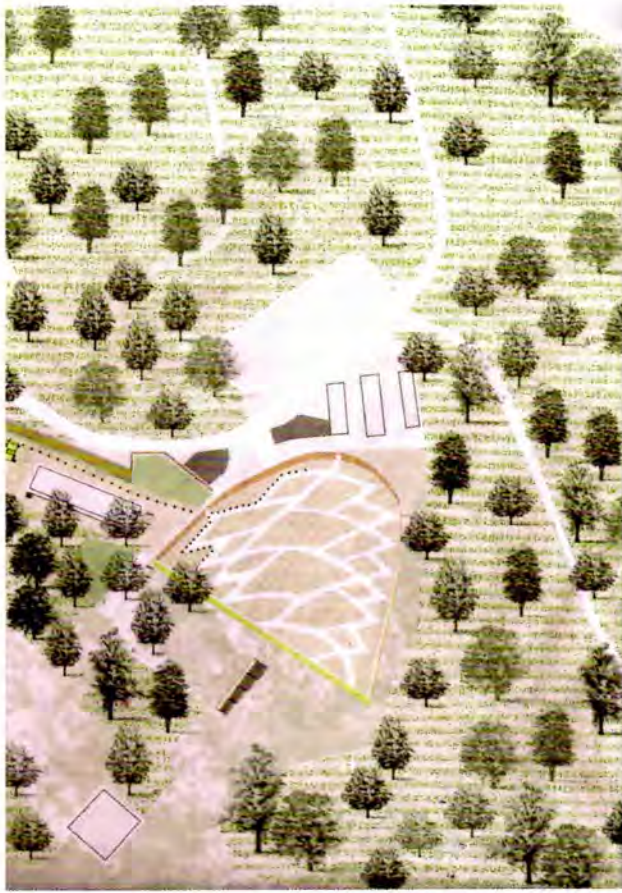
enclosure, light and shade, *allées*, paths, climate or time, narratives, the relation of inside to outside; nor is the listing of the 'accessories': flowers, social parasols and sunshades, even animals. All garden-makers, she argues, must have 'determined, thought and conceived' their place; everything is *placed* (though some might think *misplaced*). And every nation, and indeed different parts of a country, have their own mode of establishing a garden – the English hail 'The Front Garden' in an 'acclaimed BBC TV programme', while Americans emphasize the yard.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is this armada of amateur gardeners, says Peter Latz, that plays 'an important role in garden culture . . . they like to experiment and relate to new themes (self-supply, health)'.<sup>5</sup>

Gardens must have been originally what individuals contrived for their own needs and perhaps refreshment; that these were almost certainly focused on producing things to eat does not necessarily mean they did not give pleasure to their creators (vegetable gardens these days, in Greece, for example, and probably elsewhere, position flowers at the end of each row of produce). The urge to extend such gardens into something we could call 'pleasure' or 'aesthetic' gardens is visible first in images of medieval gardens, like the miller's walled garden and orchard in René d'Anjou's *Mortification de vaine plaisance* from around 1470.<sup>6</sup> Then in the Renaissance this was codified in sixteenth-century humanist writing that celebrated how 'the industry of peasants has been such that nature incorporated with art is made an artificer, and the connatural of art; and from both of them

is made a third nature, which I would not know how to name.'<sup>7</sup> Despite that writer's hesitation, he is clearly writing about what we would call gardens. Such gardens that are more than agriculture still survive, give or take the influence of climate, soil, economic contexts and the social status of the individual gardener. They all negotiate that strange 'incorporation' of nature and art or culture, and may still produce sites about which we, or even the maker, are uncertain as to what they are best called or how described.

Modern gardens have sought to be very modern. Some of the early efforts, as discussed in the Introduction, tried hard to be different and new. And 'newness' has been always a consuming passion for some gardeners and continues to be so. While the forms and structural elements of gardens – beds, pergolas, pools, terracing, borders, decoration – seem to be invariable, much thought has gone into how these can be manipulated, and both planting and garden decoration have tried hard to make something new. In 2013 Tim Richardson produced a book on the 'new' English garden, and we have books that 'reinvent' the garden, like *New Classic Gardens* from the Royal Horticultural Society (a nice title, appealing to both the brand new and the reliability of tradition).

One event suggests this need to rethink both garden-making and its challenges. The Parabola garden at Hadspen in Somerset was at least 200 years old, and Penelope Hobhouse transformed it into an ornamental garden, specializing in hostas; it was taken over by Nori and Sandra Pope in 1989,



7 A proposal for the oval garden at Hadspen, Somerset, by Foreign Office Architects, 2006.

who completely replanted it, enlarging the hosta collection. When they retired in 2005, Niall Hobhouse launched a competition to reformulate it, asking for ‘a decisive reconfiguration of the ground itself . . . [a] brief to provide a platform that can in the future support any type, style, scale or density of planting (or ‘gardening’); the new gardener was to be imagined ‘as the theatre director’. The winning design by Foreign Office Architects (illus. 7) met with a barrage of criticism and only modest applause. Meanwhile, the site had been cleared, and in the aftermath of the inconclusive debate it was decided to offer

individual plots to different gardeners who could put forward interesting proposals. These were chronicled in *The Plot*, the Parabola Garden News Sheet, where we could see in the modest dimension of these areas how ‘newness’ emerges. The whole ‘affair’, which it was indeed, suggested how conservative gardenists can be. Meanwhile Penelope Hobhouse herself had moved on to make the places she is justly famed for and on which she has widely published.<sup>8</sup>

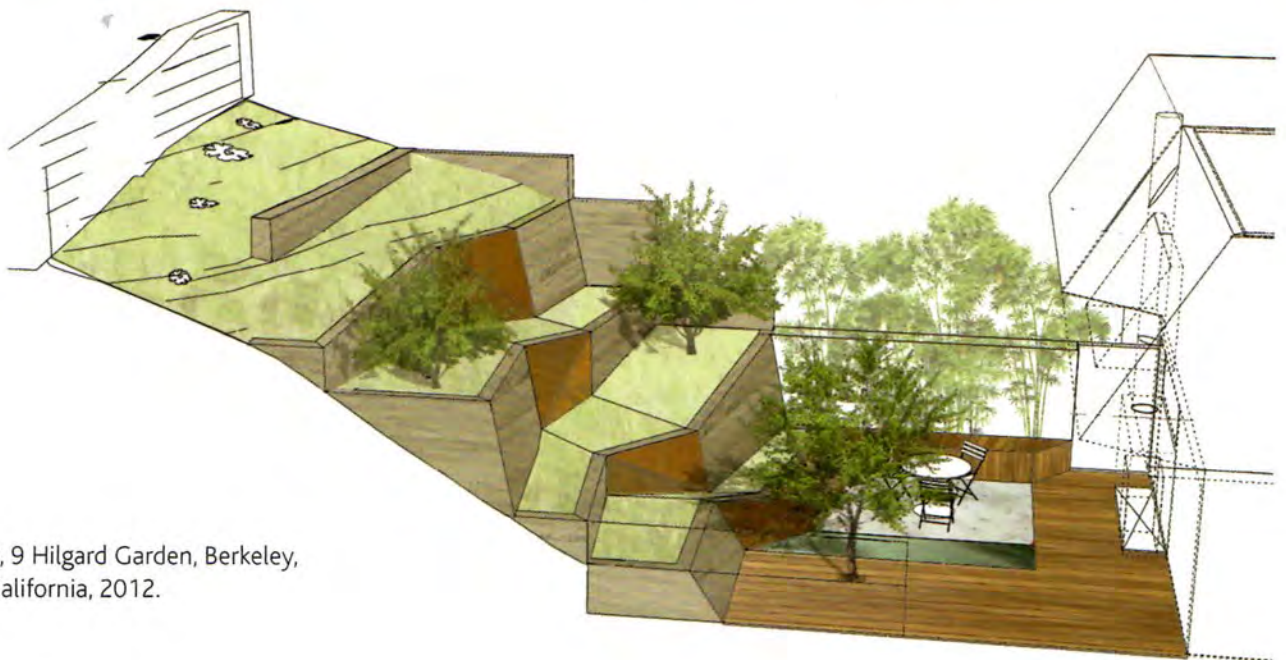
What follows are some perspectives on the new, which involve both materials and, more conspicuously, strongly individual visions of the world *outside* the garden itself. Those who seek expertise either from professional (that is, licensed) landscape architects or from garden designers and jobbing landscapers will probably espouse traditional forms and materials, but satisfaction derives from the mutual agreement between client and designer, and the extent to which they contrive a place that is at once coherent and imaginative and makes something new and even unexpected on the site. There is also the rarer example of professional designers, expert in horticulture and invention, making gardens for themselves: Roberto Burle Marx’s Santo Antonio da Bica (his home, his office, his laboratory – see chapter Two), or Lawrence Halprin, whose design of a dance deck for his wife had a profound effect on the choreography of other people’s private gardens as well as how he conceived of public spaces and people’s use of them.<sup>9</sup> With or without that extra help that a professional can bring, a huge majority of people in the world establish and cultivate their own

gardens, heeding the injunction of Voltaire's *Candide*.

For a professionally designed garden, we may look to the work of Mary Barenfeld, a recently licensed landscape architect, who created a small garden on a steep hillside in Berkeley, California (illus. 8, 9). It provides two terraces of wooden boards, one by the house alongside a granite patio and a sliver of water, and another, smaller one at the top with views over San Francisco Bay. The success of the garden is both that it gladly accepts its hillside, and that its modest dimensions (1,150 sq. ft) are enlivened not simply by a collection of plants – Japanese maples, creeping jenny over the concrete walls, lemon ground thyme as ground cover – but by the deliberate play of geometry up the hillside. The board-formed concrete walls, which also do service as a staircase, pick up the texture of the wooden decks, and the sharp, irregular angles of the terracing seem to increase the garden's scope; screens of perforated Corten steel cast shadows from the adjacent bamboo grove and effectively shield this garden from its neighbours. There is (unsurprisingly in California) a strong Japanese feel to the garden that Barenfeld acknowledges; but the geometry is also reminiscent of Gabriel Guévrekian's cubist *Jardin d'Hyères* in Provence, and the perforated steel slices in Bernard Lassus' *COLAS HQ* in Paris.<sup>10</sup> But the small garden is attentive to (and indeed celebrates) its site, relishes its very select materials, while at the same time honouring its clients and how they and their children will use it.

A few clients know exactly what they need, expecting the expert to make sense of their requirements and provide technical recommendations that align with their wishes; yet the designer has to listen carefully and then push their wishes to 'the next level' and give the clients something more than they expected. There are gardeners who don't know what they want and look to the professional for suggestions, with which, if judged well as to the clients' funding, the site itself and its later use and maintenance, they'll go along. Sometimes the professional will be able to propose a design that is striking and the client accepts; but many people need to see and use the 'real thing' before they understand what they've got themselves into. In an ideal world the finished garden should be a surprise to both client and designer. This undercuts, though, the whole idea of making a garden, which (some gardeners would say) is more interesting than the result, more process than product.<sup>11</sup>

There is little scope for generalizing further about gardeners' gardens. Each may have a strong personality, none seems comparable with others, each speaks to the visitor (when they are admitted) in terms that can be enlightening, mystifying and challenging and that need – and what garden does not ask for this? – time and patience to absorb. Some of the examples that follow have been hailed in Tim Richardson's latest book, *The New English Garden*; yet their innovation (as Richardson admits) is hard to pin down, and his opening remarks could refer to all gardens, new and old. What he tends to evade is that all gardens are endemically atavistic and the past looms or infiltrates the 'new'



8, 9 Hilgard Garden, Berkeley, California, 2012.

differently in each case; what Alasdair Forbes, the maker of Plaz Metaxu, calls, after Braque, its 'compenetration'.

'Newness' is indeed an elusive concept: Brenda Colvin in *Modern Gardens* (1953) appealed to 'the common touch of the contemporary spirit'. Richardson takes our own 'contemporary scene' to be mainly what he terms 'the end of a floriferous road which has been developing since the late Victorian period'. So he, rightly, lauds 'new horticulture', 'led by Piet Oudolf in the Netherlands, and the role of gardeners in the 'new' English garden that he chronicles. None of his chosen sites neglects this strong horticultural element, but he nevertheless has to take notice of designs that foreground other things as well as plantsmanship, like symbolism, autobiography, 'modernism', historicism, abstraction and traditional forms, simply to be able to say that 'there is no danger of English gardening becoming stereotyped or stuck in the rut.' However different are the arts – as architecture, painting and sculpture necessarily are – one still looks in each 'newness' for coherence and imagination; these, too, take different forms.

One French designer, Gilles Clément, has a different perspective on the 'new gardening'. His 'Garden of Movement' is perhaps a misleading phrase, but it alludes to his celebration of how plants move and self-propagate and how humans must adjust to their movements, not ours.<sup>12</sup> He records his dismay, when visiting Sissinghurst, that a plant that had trespassed onto a path was removed from where it was not wanted! He is most famous for the eponymous section of Parc

André Citroën in Paris, but that 'garden of movement' (illus. 10) has not prospered in a public park, nor have his gardens below the walkway to the west of the Grande Arche at La Défense in the same city, doubtless because both places are too frequented: too many human rather than plant movements perhaps. So his major claim for fame is his own garden at La Creuse, where gardening in its valley and upper meadow 'consists in constant interpretation of the dynamics of work. The object is not to maintain a pre-set image or aesthetic, but to consider a sculptural and biological balance, open to the greatest possible diversity, to wonder and impermanence.' That work is indeed wonderful, but it doesn't seem a mode of gardening that could be readily and widely adopted; yet his rhetoric is powerful and ultimately visionary, as his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France makes clear.

Another unusual departure from horticultural priorities, forced now by the site on which it was made, came with the garden of Derek Jarman at Prospect Cottage, begun in 1986 on the inhospitable shingle near the nuclear power station on the Kent coast. Sir Roy Strong finds it a clarion call for those who 'are ready for startling changes to what constitutes a garden'.<sup>13</sup> It was both a profound gesture against the threats of the modern world, nuclear disasters and AIDS, a triumphant declaration of Jarman's own artistry, and a reproof of the usual Sussex gardens of 'Close' and 'Crescent', that 'would give Gertrude Jekyll a heart attack' with their 'desert of fuchsias' and omnipresent lawns ('I am so glad there are no