

Ephemeral Gardens Designed to Last. The Perennial Movement in Landscaping

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Prologue to Landscape and Garden Theory

According to Oscar Wilde, after the “fall of man from the Garden of Eden” nature lost its human dwelling and home qualities and became uncomfortable and wild, so that man had to invent landscaping and architecture as human domains — mediators between the unleashed forces of nature and the anthropic environment that ensure the satisfaction of needs and a thankful standard of living. In order to master these uncontrollable forces, to meet needs and to achieve a certain degree of comfort, man has had to appropriate nature through certain processes of “domestication” such as agriculture, landscaping and continuous maintenance of the landscaped state.

Compared to buildings, gardens seem to belong to a more dynamic category of design, with a much greater capacity for transformation and adaptability, due to the fact that “they are ‘constructed’ largely from ‘light,’ ‘vegetal’ elements,”¹ with an ephemeral and cyclical character. The garden, the park and / or the courtyard manifest themselves as different species of landscaping, and yet all take up innumerable aspects of contemporary art as ephemeral aestheticization every day. Today landscape constitutes – both literally and metaphorically – the horizon of our existence in time and space. The European gaze, which once – when not lost in imagination, in search of the heavenly beauty of the unseen God – “focused on things at a near or medium distance, has learned, since the Renaissance, to look boldly at the sky.”² The territory we design and inhabit today is measured on the larger scale of an ever-changing planet.

The origin of the term landscape is relatively recent and separates “European attitudes into two periods: pre- and post-landscape. The concept of landscape, as it is understood today, did not exist in the Middle Ages, Renaissance or Baroque.”³ Society was more oriented towards the architectural interior, extending almost exclusively the observation of nature to the cloister or the vegetable garden, the exterior landscape being merely a backdrop for these scenes. The world’s view has been externalized over the centuries, as long as man has exercised increasing dominance over his environment.

The Emergence and Use of Perennials in the History of Gardens

The Perennial Movement in landscaping is not a new phenomenon in garden design. It was practiced between the 19th and 20th centuries in Germany and may have been around since antiquity, as perennials have been cultivated since the beginnings of civilization.

1 Kázmer Kovács, *Peisaj cu grădină și casă* [Landscape with Garden and House] (Bucharest: Simetria, 2011), 8.

2 *Ibid.*, 76.

3 Katia Talento et al., “A Review with a European Perspective,” in *Land* 8, 6 (2019), 2.



Fig. 1: Illustrated drawing from William Robinson's *Wild Garden* book showing various species of wild perennials.

Fig. 2: Vintage photo of landscape gardener Gertrude Jekyll in her country garden (early 20th century) in contrast to the garden seen today (2011).

The break with the classical order of geometric, rigid and ideal compositions dictated by historical Renaissance, Baroque or English gardens, echoes which obstruct the development potential of the plant's native form, occurred at the end of the 19th century with the steady rise of naturalism. The liberation from the drudgery and tedious maintenance of these gardens, designed not to endure over time in the absence of human care, began with the publication in 1870 of William Robinson's "The Wild Garden,"⁴ which advocated "greater use of wild and naturalized plants that endure over time in the absence of daily maintenance. Robinson's illustrated journal (Fig. 1) and his many books over the next half century did much to promote hardy perennials and shrubs,"⁵ as did the garden drawings and writings of Gertrude Jekyll.⁶ (Fig. 2)

By the first decade of the 20th century, herbaceous borders, shrubs, rockery and even wild landscaping with perennial grasses had become almost commonplace in gardens and around British ruins.

4 William Robinson (1838-1935) was an Irish landscape designer influential in promoting more natural and less formal landscaping and planting. After appearing in many gardening periodicals, his first two books, *Gleaning from French Gardens* (1868) and *Promenades and Gardens of Paris* (1869) were based on his experiences in France but the book who construct his reputation was *The Wild Garden* published in 1870 who grew in seven editions during his life. It can be said that he's new ideas about gardening were in tune with the British Arts and Crafts movement taste for simplicity thus bringing to attention the fact that wild garden can counteract the urbanization and industrialization effects.

5 Noel Kingsbury, *Garden Flora. The Natural and Cultural History of the Plants in Your Garden* (New York: Timber Press, 2016), 37.

6 Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) was one of Great Britain's foremost 20th century landscape painters, craftswomen, practical gardeners and landscape critics. Inspired by her first passion, the Impressionist painting and the model provided by the work of William Turner, she would become a landscape designer primarily interested in how to achieve a much more persistence and maintenance of the seasonal flower colour in private cottage gardens. Subsequently influenced by the Anglo-Irish author William Robinson, over the course of her career she designed over 400 gardens, the majority of which were in England and its surroundings (around 350 gardens). As a prolific writer and critic, she wrote in *The Country Life* magazine and she founded along William Robinson *The Garden* magazine on whose editorial crew she served a long time. Through her many articles (1000) and books (13) she was among the first to popularise the idea of "controlled" wildness by rediscovering the perennial character of the natural landscape. For her, the observation of plant behavior was a source of inspiration for how the garden should be designed and should work.



“Perennial gardens have a centuries-old association with ruins that were once houses, churches or fortifications and the atmosphere around them is usually romantic, nostalgic and contemplative.”⁷

The rise in popularity of gardens near ruins and farmsteads in England and Germany led throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to the emergence of nurseries in Western Europe. Among the most famous ones from Germany, the Arends-Maubach nursery recently celebrated its 130th anniversary, sanctioning it as the oldest in Europe.⁸ Although each generation has made its own contribution to the nursery’s history, the spirit of its founder and his passion for perennial gardening lives on. The nursery expanded rapidly, and by 1901 Arends was concentrating on perennials, producing new species through extensive breeding programs. The company named many of its hybrids *x arendsii*, helping to establish the name Arends, which has persisted until today in plant catalogs.⁹

The post-World War I period saw a steady and eventually massive loss of plants from warm-climate crops, a loss that only began to slow in the last decades of the last century as nurseries in the Southeast Asian region began to make their own plant selections. The persistent ones have endured, but there is a distinct sense that a golden age has been left behind. In the interwar period, Germany was the leading country promoting the cultivation of perennials, with a rich and continuous production of new hybridized plant species that resulted from the deliberate crossing of the originals. However, the Second World War brought devastation to German and Western European gardening in general. Cultivars continued to disappear after the 1950s, and some species were lost forever to breeding.

Postwar nursery practice increasingly focused on plants that could be mass-produced, which of course provided a large number of good crops, but from a relatively limited number of genera. Plant development for large-scale public landscaping has also undergone an important evolution.

The 1960s marked something of a low point in terms of the range of available plants, but during this period enthusiasts in Britain, the United States, Germany and later in the Netherlands began to experiment and use new perennials leading by the end of the century to the development of a cultural movement that was to change the world of garden design.

7 Piet Oudolf and Rick Darke, *Gardens of the High Line. Elevating the Nature of Modern Landscapes* (New York: Timber Press, 2017), 28-33.

8 <https://www.ft.com/content/ce108d14-3e57-11e8-bcc8-cebcb81f1f90> (accessed on 18.07.2022).

9 *Ibid.*

Principles of the Perennial Movement in Contemporary Design

The New Perennial Movement in contemporary landscaping (1980s - present) set out from the beginning to revive ecological garden design principles through horticultural trials practiced in Western Europe. One of the best-known places where the Movement flourished was Hummelo (the Netherlands), whose nursery served the ambition of landscape gardeners Piet Oudolf (Fig. 3) and Henk Gerritsen¹⁰ to experiment with growing native perennials. Until this period, perennials and field grasses were considered unsuitable for public or private gardens because of their proximity to the “untamed” character of wild plants. A text on gardens designed up to the 20th century mentions that “perennial grasses were rarely present in the composition of gardens,”¹¹ except for rare specimens of pampas grass (*Cortaderia sp.*), fountain grass (*Pennisetum sp.*) or silver grass (*Miscanthus sp.*). These were usually presented in garden compositions as curiosities and were called ornamental grasses to distinguish them from turf species.

The very purpose of the Movement was to reveal to everyone that the wild nature model is valid in landscaping and architecture and that in order to perpetuate and preserve the values of the natural landscape, a change in the way the garden was conceived — which had been subject to classical design canons — was necessary. The current trend proposes the introduction into domestic and public gardens of as many species of perennial field plants as possible, which are found in the immediate vicinity of sites, but which have not been used or rarely been used in garden design, and which are sustainable for these spaces’ maintenance.

Using the organic mass of these perennials to define public or private garden spaces is a creative way to increase ecological functionality, due to the fact that these perennial grasses persist and maintain their wild flora over the years. Unlike the world of wood, steel, brick and concrete architecture, designed to defy the passage of time as much as possible, the architecture of perennial gardens changes extremely dynamically and cyclically according to the five seasons that dictate the plants’ life.

The manifesto work in which the two contemporary landscape designers set out their vision of the new perennial garden inspired by wild nature appeared in 1990 under the title “Dream of Plants for the New Generation of Garden Plants.” The text of this book focuses more on the exposition of two major principles rediscovered and revitalized in the new perennial garden: horticultural experimentation and intervention with native plants drawn from wild nature and “the shift in the landscape gardening discourse from the decorative (compositional-symbolic) function of the garden to the need to increase the spontaneity and variety of species according to the examples and models provided by nature.”¹²

On one hand, the historic Renaissance / Baroque enclosed gardens and the open landscape / English gardens are characterized by a certain ideal need to immortalize a symbolic composition. This attempt to eternalize a composition, however, implies the permanent garden dependence on regular cleaning and garden maintenance, preventing sustainable self-regulation and self-maintenance phenomena of the whole. All this to maintain an orderly, obsessively controlled image, and to aspire to traditional ideals of geometric and compositional perfection of form.

10 Henk Geritsen (1948-2008) was an important figure of the Dutch New Perennial Movement. In 1968 he started studying history and politics at the University of Amsterdam and later (between 1976 and 1985) at Rietseld Academy of Art he will earn his living from painting. After visiting the garden of Mien Ruys in 1977 the moment of epiphany in his next career, he began to design the famous Priona Gardens together with his friend Anton Schepers. In collaboration with his colleague Piet Oudolf has published two important books: *Dream Plants for the Natural Garden* (1990) and *Planting the Natural Garden* (2003). In all his career, Geritsen wanted to realize creations of gardens which looks alike pure nature with limited interventions.

11 Ágnes Herczeg, *Szép és kies kertek. A kora reneszánsz kertek Itáliában és Magyarországon [Beautiful Pleasant Gardens. Early Renaissance Gardens in Italy and Hungary]* (Miercurea Ciuc: Pro Print, 2005), 30.

12 “Five Seasons. The gardens of Piet Oudolf” (2019) (accessed on 20.08.2022), min. 10:54.

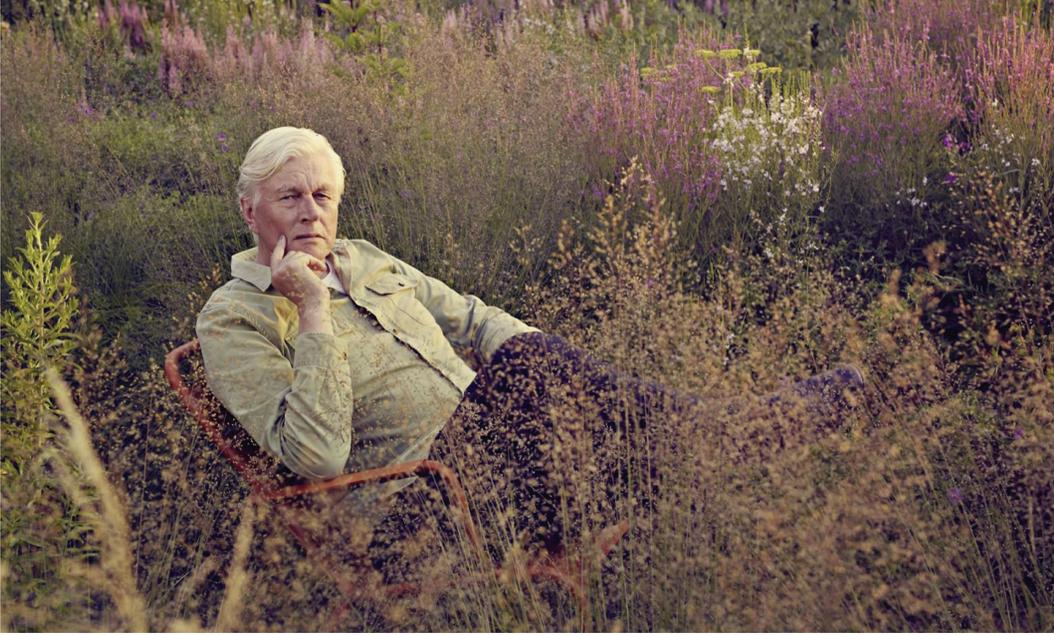


Fig. 3: Landscape gardener Piet Oudolf in his personal nursery garden in Humello.

On the other hand, the perennial garden involves the permanent metamorphosis of the garden in accordance with the laws of nature, without any major intervention of human control. Perhaps this major difference between the two types of gardens brings the perennial garden closer to the natural landscape pattern and the plant functioning in a natural mechanism. The perennial garden relies on the ephemeral of the moment: every year, every season, nature behaves differently. Perennial gardens, like everchanging nature, change from year to year, from season to season, never striving to make a different impression every hour, every minute and every second of every day. Of all man-made spaces, the garden is the one showing the greatest degree of change and transformation. Therefore, the ephemeral spectacle finds its fulfilment in landscaping through the human experience and the living of the perennial garden.

The movement is born out of a desire to design a new kind of open garden, “not by observing and admiring the wonderful panoramas of natural habitats but by experiencing what plants do and how they evolve and behave”¹³ in their living environment. This could be seen in the long practice undertaken in the English and German nurseries of the 19th century and since the end of the last century by the two horticulturists mentioned above, who through their experiments in hybridization led horticulture in the direction of designing a new type of garden rediscovered after a long temporal hiatus. According to German perennial landscape gardener Cassian Schmidt, “the New Perennial Movement in landscape gardening was born in both the German and Dutch horticultural areas”¹⁴ through numerous studies and experiments in hybridization which eventually led to the expected result.

The perception of the metamorphoses the perennial garden undergoes is made through the visual experience offered by the transition from one season to another, complemented by the various tactile and olfactory experiences of the gardener, horticulturist, landscape gardener, architect or simple garden visitor. Each year, each season and each day spent in this type of garden focuses at a fundamental level on individual experience through the senses and only then at a higher cognitive level on analyzing, understanding the abstract design’s symbolism and the sensory-perceived, directed geometric compositions.

In the spirit of sense-generated living and experience, the decay season of perennial garden plants known also as “The Fall” is distinguished by a faint smell of coriander, and the visual garden’s appeal emphasizes the composition generated by the skeletal plant’s fossils

13 Ibid., min. 9:41.

14 Ibid., min. 10:00.

(e.g., compositions of umbel species: *Heracleum sp.*). The specific ambience of the perennial garden in the period of nature's decay is also given by the plants' reactions to physical phenomena (the gentle rustling and planting of plant bodies in the wind and autumn storms). The grass's fineness provides a harmonious contrast to the bold texture of the broad-leaved plants, and their lightness makes them the main garden art and architecture protagonists.

All these characteristics and features of the site in which the garden is set are closer to the model of nature than to that of established historic gardens. However, the perennial garden is not to be confused with nature itself, even if it is perhaps closest to nature in manifestation and appearance. As Piet Oudolf argues, "the perennial garden interferes with the presence of human activity. It looks like a wild one, but in essence it is not."¹⁵ In fact, it needs to be not, for otherwise it would contradict the idea of the garden as a landscaped space designed by man to tame wild nature. In other words, in Oudolf's view, the perennial garden, like any other type of garden, actually reveals how the human species perceives or would like to see order and/or harmony of plants in a familiar, "controlled nature."

Biochemically, throughout their existence, plants go through four periods of development corresponding to the four seasons of the year: growth, development, maturation and decline. Of all the periods of plant transformation, the most spectacular is that which occurs between summer and autumn. The spectacular metamorphosis of plant shapes and colors between these two seasons can be explained by the chemical reactions taking place in the leaves. Chlorophyll is the most important of the plant's plastids, giving its body its green color (with the exception of flowers and fruits) and with great importance in the plant's feeding processes. In autumn, once the plant's biological clock causes the gradual evaporation of chlorophyll, its body is left with only the other coloring pigments (rhodoplasts, chromoplasts, etc.). This explains the change in the plant's green color at full maturity to the autumn shades of yellow, orange, rusty red and tan. At the same time, the disappearance of chlorophyll causes the plant to dry out and dehydrate, resulting in the skeletal silhouette that the plant acquires at the end of its life cycle. Beyond color, perennial grasses contribute to the look derived from their unique qualities of line, shape, texture and translucence to the look, feel and sound of gardens.

The fascination of the perennial garden, however, goes beyond the scientific concept of biochemical processes by trying to understand at the macro level how the whole landscape composition evolves, transforms and manifests itself. It is about the direction created by the landscape gardener with the knowledge of how plants work. Landscaping the perennial garden is about more than the perennials themselves. The main issues raised by the gardens are atmosphere, ambience, seasonality and spontaneity of composition. Addressing the aesthetics of ugliness, Henk Gerritsen points out in the Perennial Movement's seminal theoretical work that "plants have aesthetic qualities not only in their flowering period but also beyond it, at the end of their life cycle."¹⁶

For the two landscapers, choosing a complete list of perennials for use in the garden was in fact an intensive task, carried out over a period of several years during which they traveled, searched for and found the right plants. In addition, in order to arrive at the final selection of perennials used in their gardens, the couple carried out numerous experiments and tests in growing and hybridizing these plants. Their nursery in the Netherlands has become famous over the last 20 years in the world of garden design. Like the great poets, writers and artists, Oudolf also "undertook long documenting journeys in his early days as a landscape gardener and horticulturist to learn, observe and 'feed' on the acquired knowledge of this formative Grand Tour."¹⁷ Over time, as landscape gardener Piet Oudolf experienced success, more and more landscapers, architects and artists came to Humello to be inspired by the pattern of his "wild" creations.

¹⁵ Ibid., min. 5:12.

¹⁶ Piet Oudolf and Henk Gerritsen, *Droomplanten. Die nieuwe generatie tuinplanten [Dream Plants. A New Generation of Garden Plants]* (Zutphen: Terra, 1990), 15.

¹⁷ "Five Seasons," min. 12:50.

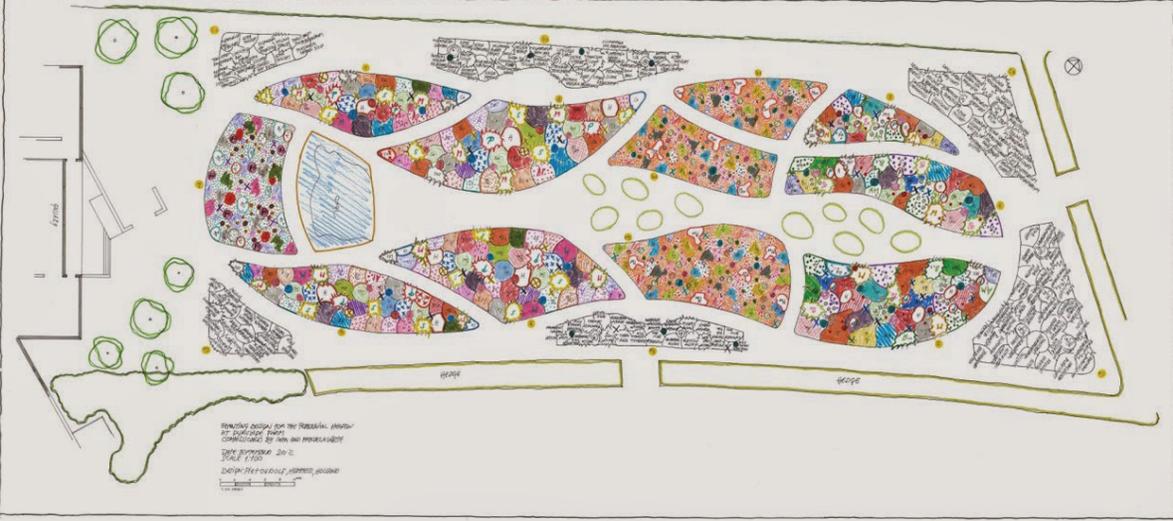


Fig. 4: The planting plan of Durslade Farm, Somerset (England) drawn by Piet Oudolf.

Case Studies. Piet Oudolf's Perennial Gardens

1. Private Rural Gardens: Durslade Farm in Somerset (England) and the Garden near Council Bluffs in Iowa (USA)

Durslade Farm in Somerset, England is a collection of traditional rural buildings and outbuildings dating back to the 18th century, restored and converted today into dwellings and extended into the garden with contemporary art galleries, restaurants and offices for contemporary artists. Behind the new art gallery building with the exhibition spaces, the landscape designer Piet Oudolf has proposed and designed a one-and-a-half-acre perennial garden with a totally different atmosphere from the sober brick and stone buildings of the historic farm houses, halls and saddles. The idea of the project was to propose a perennial garden that is lost in the major landscape of the farm. It was therefore conceived as a very large garden with a complex system of paths and walkways. The landscaped ensemble is structured by weaving three different types of gardens: a wet garden with a pond, a perennial meadow, and in the middle of the ensemble, a dominant insertion of perennial grasses. The design of the garden started intuitively from a planting sketch (Fig. 4) which was later transcribed into a large-scale masterplan where the proportion, scale and density of the planted areas could be correctly read.

For Oudolf, the planting plan is intuitive, easy to decipher. The first phase of the project consisted of designing a composition with atypical species distinctly mentioned in the planting legend. The author initially chose about 60 names of perennial plant species, after which he established a hierarchy of plant species that in terms of their adaptation and suitability to the site could be integrated or constitute the reference plants used in the proposed garden. This process of thinking through the planting matrices in plan is related to mathematical thinking and seasonal planning of how plants will develop and transform over time. For Oudolf, it was necessary to first forecast plants that flower before June, then those that flower in the fall, and only then those that flower in between. The drawings show the contrast between the ground cover plants areas, the repetitive perennial volumes and the punctuation given by shrubs. They show the space's rhythmicity, uniqueness and structuring between them creating the ambience of a "designed spontaneity." In the legend of the planting sketches, he established a system of colored symbols marking each type and name of plant. After composing the general planting plan, the number of plants per square meter is calculated. The final project drawing reveals on the plan the exact specimen number in each sketched garden area. In design practice one conventionally works "from the level of a bird's eye," but when it comes to experiencing the space created for those who will walk and visit the garden, perspective control is used, as in architecture



Fig. 5: Perspective with 18th century historic buildings, contemporary art gallery extension and Oudolf's designed perennial garden at Durslade Farm, Somerset, England.

and urban planning, from the level of the human eye. The perspectives of the visitor perceiving the garden will be controllable by the landscape designer and as a result the garden will retain its aesthetic qualities in both its peak flowering season and its declining season.

Therefore, the way of designing in plan and elevation is not a random one, but a true mental experience of the garden at the human eye perspective level. This type of experience must be linked to an awareness of the transformations that occur throughout the months and seasons.

“Ultimately the garden is a promise. It does not necessarily have to be there. The most important thing in designing the garden is to imagine what it can be on the chosen site or... in other words, to see the real landscape potential of the site.”¹⁸

For the garden Oudolf designed at Durslade Farm, perhaps one of the major challenges of the project was to integrate the “wild garden” spectacle of color and form with the rural and restrained traditional English farmhouse architecture and the contemporary gallery extension. (Fig. 5) The functional conversion and landscaping project brings to the fore the complementarity between two contrasting issues: the persistence of the English farmhouse heritage image over time and the ephemeral key moments in cyclical life of new perennial garden.

The observation and awareness of meadows, woodlands and natural prairie transformations due to climate changes during the year are the main methods of studying how a new perennial garden might be programmed. While in the classical gardens it is the feeling and the idea that are born in the mind of the creator shaping the surrounding nature, in perennial gardens it is the careful reality perception and observation of nature that arouses the emotion and inspiration of designing the new garden. In Oudolf's *Planting: A new perspective*, written with the garden theorist Noel Kingsbury,¹⁹ this idea of nature's impact on inspiration and creation is supported by the two when they describe the importance of the process of observation:

¹⁸ Ibid., min. 18:26.

¹⁹ Noel Kingsbury (b. 1958) is a leading British-born contemporary landscape gardener and garden theorist whose writings address gardening practice, plant science and related topics. He is best known for his

“The longer you stay the more you understand and see what is really going on in the garden. If you understand what is happening in the garden in the few seconds when the plant mass flowers or when the seeds fall to the ground after the plant matures, you can feel the significance of the creative process of design.”²⁰

Just as plants go through slow stages of growth until the “reproduction project” is completed, so the garden design project goes through various phases of knowledge and experimentation in order to mature from a simple concept sketch into the plant’s designed space reality.

Understanding the way landscaping and horticulture has been studied so far, it can be argued that until the Perennial Movement everything revolved around flowers and garden flowering, and color was the most important attribute of the garden. Today, however, the design of perennial gardens diverts attention to the spectacle offered by the winter season in which the real character of the plant structure is revealed by the vivid colors of summer: in this season the plants *Pycnanthemum sp.* with dark brown seeds mixed with the light, yellow seeds of plants of the *Sporobolus sp.* family. When all these seeds come into contact with mist or ice or snow crystals, the décor provided by nature to the garden in winter is complete. Thus, the multi-colored winter seeds (yellow, brown and gray) take on a similar importance in this season to the brightly coloured flowers of the same plants during the warm season in the temperate zone.

To draw an analogy with the theater, in the perennial gardens of Oudolf, Gerritsen or Cassian Schmidt,²¹ the protagonist of the garden is the plant itself, which is immortalized not only at the moment of flowering but also in all the brief moments of its life during an annual cycle. The new mission of the landscaper is therefore to put the plants on stage and let them play in all their ephemeral moments of life. With the Dutch Modern Current, as the Perennial Movement is still erroneously called because of Piet Oudolf’s celebrity, the fascination of garden shifts from the image of the timeless symbolic setting to one that emphasizes the ephemeral moments in a plant’s life. Indeed, so successful was Oudolf that these plants are often erroneously referred to as “Dutch wave perennials,” even though much of the rationale for his gardens originated in 20th century German gardens.

The father of the German Perennial Movement of the early 20th century, Karl Foerster developed the concept of “wild garden art,”²² far removed from the meticulous, mathematically coordinated, color-coordinated and labor-intensive planting of English garden perennials. This expression became a guiding principle of the late 20th century Dutch and German New Perennial Movement leading to various interpretations of how the garden should be designed. Thus, from the German Perennial Movement of the early 20th century two different styles of perennial garden were born in the course of time: the Dutch Perennial Movement oriented more towards the visual composition of compatibilities between all perennial grasses and the German Perennial Movement oriented more towards the purest possible combination of site-specific native species. “But it took until the 1990s, when the English rural garden finally took its course, for the great contribution of the German horticulturist Foerster to perennial garden design to be recognized”²³ by both the German and Dutch New Perennial Movements.

promotion of naturalistic planting design in gardens and designed landscapes, as well as his collaboration with Piet Oudolf on books about contemporary planting design. As one of the few British authors on the topic, he is one of the foremost garden historians and connoisseurs in Central Europe being familiar with developments in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

20 “Five Seasons,” min. 24:00.

21 Cassian Schmidt (b. 1962) is considered the perennial master at the forefront of the New German Wave Movement. An outstanding landscape designer, author, teacher and lecturer, Cassian is appreciated for his exceptional combinations of perennials and grasses. Director of the Hermannshof Garden, a world-renowned research garden, Cassian’s role includes developing sustainable, low-maintenance plant combinations using natural plant communities.

22 <https://thegardenvisor.co.uk/karl-foerster-garten-unfamiliar-pioneer/> (accessed on 19.08.2022).

23 Ibid.



Fig. 6: Cassian Schmidt - Steppe plantation design in the Weihenstephan garden with yucca varieties.

Piet Oudolf's modern-day analogue in Germany is the landscape gardener, professor and horticulturist Cassian Schmidt, considered to be the "master landscape gardener at the head of the New German Wave Movement,"²⁴ director and creator of the Hermannshof research garden near Weinheim. Professor Cassian Schmidt is currently conducting some of the world's most complex crossbreeding and hybridization experiments aimed at producing new, sustainable and low-maintenance plant combinations using natural, native plant communities from around the world that can enter a state of symbiosis. "In my naturalistic landscape design, I use broad, painterly trails of hardy plants so well adapted to their sites that they provide year-round interest but require less maintenance than traditional mixed borders."²⁵ Unlike Piet Oudolf, who allowed from the beginning native perennials to be mixed with foreign ones to produce more spectacular compositions, Cassian Schmidt initially insisted on composing the garden exclusively with groups of grasses and perennials specific to the local wild flora in which the garden is designed. He argued early in his career that "the dynamic mix of unique perennials and uniquely local naturalistic grasses is always arranged according to habitat and origin - forest, prairie, steppe, pond edge, dry meadow - which creates a kaleidoscope that draws inspiration from nature without reproducing it."²⁶ Later changing his opinion on the purity of conservation of native perennials, he now combines similar perennials from around the world to produce spectacular compositions (Fig. 6) that are both similar and also very different from those of Piet Oudolf. For this reason, "German naturalistic planting is no longer an ecological restoration, but rather a derivative of it."²⁷ As such, it does not offer the same value for wildlife, but it can offer aesthetically more than a simple landscape restoration.

In the example of the garden designed by Oudolf on a property near Council Bluffs in the state of Iowa (USA) by composing in plan groups and matrices mixing six species of herbaceous plants (*Sporobolus sp.*, *Molinia sp.* etc.) the feeling of endless lines to divergent perspectives was created. Moreover, through the sinuous paths of the alleys but also of the matrices in the garden vegetation islands, something was created that once translated from drawing to reality, the basic planting behind it could no longer be perceived. From this basic planting, however, emerge

24 <https://www.landscape.net.au/cassian-schmidt-international-garden-designer/> (accessed on 19.08.2022).

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 <https://gardenrant.com/2017/12/insights-from-germany.html> (accessed on 25.08.2022).

the grasses and plants that will participate in the garden's spectacle. But each of the so-called spontaneous plants has been planted in a fixed, planned place to give the impression of a surreal meadow. It is very reminiscent of a meadow but it is not because of the presence of plant species with which the perennial grasses are mixed to form the composition and which normally would not be found in a real meadow.

Through these mosaic-like gardens composed by mixing and combining a very wide variety of plants, Oudolf's works can be seen as reactions or gestures of resistance against ecological extinction. If the discourse is redirected towards climate change due to the phenomenon of global warming, the statistical conclusion regarding human actions is that humans are not yet acting in sufficient number to ameliorate man-made problems. British and Dutch studies show that only when the term extinction is used do people finally understand that animal and plant species are disappearing, from rare flowering plant genera to species of insects like bees or centipedes.

Using the multiple symbiosis between different species and groups of plants in nature, Piet Oudolf celebrates not only the spectacle of their beauty but also the desire to preserve and perpetuate these plant varieties in the future. From this point of view, by analogy, the plant species preservation and conservation are similar to built heritage protection with the difference that the world's plant heritage is preserved by perpetuating plant species, while monuments and architectural ensembles are handed down by trying to preserve and restore as much as possible of the valuable building's original material. The action of landscaping the world's perennial gardens could therefore take on a political dimension defending the environment under pressure from uncontrolled, polluting and destructive human exploitation.

2. Large Urban Public Gardens: Lurie Garden, Battery Garden and High Line Garden

Today, the best experiment for applying principles of sustainable renaturation can be conducted in the public spaces of cities (squares, alleys, streets) where it can be seen how the presence of a perennial garden will be able to influence people's conception and mentality of the time and world we live in. By bringing the garden that imitates nature into the chaos of the contemporary city's structure, people can see another side of human community concerned with the perpetuation of species as a cultural/natural heritage left to successive generations.

Piet Oudolf's High Line Garden on the route of the historic railroad in New York City and the Lurie Garden in downtown Chicago are two of his most important urban garden projects, which aimed from the outset to introduce the dimension and memory of wild nature as an oasis of tranquility in contrast to the dominant presence of the skyscrapers, noise pollution generated by the heavy traffic and the crowds of people in these urban metropolises. (Fig. 7)

In order for such landscape compositions to persist and evolve in a controlled manner over time, it was necessary that before the actual planting in early spring, an orthogonal matrix with a unit of measurement of 1m be drawn on the plowed and prepared planting soil and overlaid on the actual planting plan. In this orthogonal matrix, the boundaries of the alleys, groups of plants or the boundaries of the planting areas of the individual plants to be integrated into the composition were then drawn according to the layout. The orthogonal matrix helps to determine the specimen density for each plant measured per square meter, allowing desired flowering area compositions to be pre-visualized. It is, in fact, the early phase of planting where it is decided how dense/rare or concentrated / dispersed the plant groups or independent plants of the composition should be. In the designs of these gardens, the time period in which the inserted plants will come to create a plant mass is estimated to be about two years as has been observed in the case of the High Line Garden or Lurie Garden, which have gradually acquired over two annual cycles the volume and mass of a mature perennial garden. At this stage it can be said that this is the unique moment when one can read the design behind the future garden consisting of a set of patterns and plant layering used in such a way as to give the feeling of wild field meadows. The growth and development of plants from spring to summer the following year is very accelerated so that the overall picture of the garden takes on different proportions each month.



Fig. 7: Perspective of Piet Oudolf's Lurie Garden in the Millennium Park (Chicago).

The compatibility of perennial plant groups is experienced in a longer process that can take several years due to repeated planting and observation trials in nurseries. In plant groups made up of different species, the best compatibility between them is checked by putting together specimens of native plants. In this way it can be seen that many of the different plants growing in a particular place are more compatible than if plants from very distant territories are mixed together. Of course, if another foreign plant species joins the group of perennials, compatibility is tested by how the plant reacts to the group it is in. If it adapts and integrates into the native plant group then the joining is successful. If, on the other hand, the plant does not behave satisfactorily towards the native plant group (e.g., it either withers or prevents the other plants from growing), it is removed. Natural selection as theorized by Charles Darwin is a way of acting similar to that of contemporary human societies:

“just as a human being is not removed from a community because of the way it looks but because of the way it behaves, so in the plant world of nature a species is removed from or joined to a group of plants because of the way it behaves in relation to the group, not because of its aesthetic qualities.”²⁸

Like today's society, plants come from all over the world, but compatibility between them can be verified only by looking at how their relationship and behavior evolves towards other members of the group: surviving, dying or killing other plants.

The urban Lurie Garden in Chicago is also striking for the unusual combination Oudolf makes between plant species that are very different in both kinship and geographical position, but whose compatibility gives the garden an exotic yet native ambience - for example the combination of black onion (*Allium Nigrum*) and Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*). For Oudolf, the Lurie Garden, first opened in 2004, is one of the first attempts alongside the Battery Gardens in New York to design and execute a large urban garden that is a kind of natural vista achieved through wild planting, “planting that you can't control but only conduct.”²⁹ This idea would be carried over to all the gardens designed by Piet Oudolf after 2004.

In the next garden Oudolf designed in New York, the High Line Garden, the project's goal was to create a wild-looking garden among the railroad tracks of the former historic railroad

²⁸ “Five Seasons,” min. 51:50.

²⁹ Ibid., min. 56:30.



Fig. 8: Perspective of Piet Oudolf's High Line Garden, New York, U.S.A.

line designed and built as early as 1847 in Manhattan's West Side neighborhood and which ran through the city from what is now 10th Avenue to 11th Avenue. (Fig. 8) Due to the abandonment of this part of the city in the 1980s, the site became the subject of future functional and landscape conversions that began in the early years of the 21st century. Initially for Oudolf, finding the way he could give an old railroad track the image of a wild garden seemed impossible until he used the model of the first garden he designed in Chicago, Lurie Garden, as his inspiration. The most commendable and admirable aspect of the actual design and layout of this garden is the garden's time management. Instead of having only three seasons of garden life (spring, summer, and fall), the careful, seasonal scheduling, and sustainable design proposed by the Perennial Movement's landscapers and horticulturists make this designed garden consciously go through the visual spectacle of the five life stages typical of perennials (spring, summer, autumn, fall, and winter). From its opening in June 2009 to its completion in 2018, the High Line Garden has become an icon of contemporary American landscape architecture. Its success has inspired cities across the United States to redevelop their aging infrastructure and transform them into green public spaces designed to relax and reconnect with people in the congested, alienating urban space.

Epilogue

Consequently, the beauty of perennial garden is redefined to include all carbon cycle stages. In Oudolf's view, garden design "is not only about plants, but also about emotion, atmosphere and the ephemeral contemplation of nature."³⁰ In this sense of the cyclicity and capturing the moments, "a garden is not just a painting that everyone can look at, but rather a dynamic process that is in a much more accelerated change in relation to time than buildings, for example. You have to keep in touch with it all the time."³¹

It is clear from the text above that perennials have been present in all eras of historical garden development and will continue to exist because they most closely reflect the functional and aesthetic pattern of primordial nature. While past classical gardens are subject to a canon of

³⁰ Oudolf, Darke, *Gardens of the High Line*, 320.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

composition rules and execution recipes that only allow them to sustain themselves over time as an image through permanent human intervention, on the other hand, perennial gardens take up the model of spontaneous composition and present a model of self-sustainability and self-sufficiency that requires less frequent human interventions.

Although the New Perennial Movement in landscaping has not been sufficiently exploited, valued and widespread to date, introducing the principles of designing such gardens into urban development policies and planning in cities could help to improve the quality of the built environment. In addition to ecological benefits of using perennial gardens for the settlements' regeneration, the specific visual qualities are the garden's ability to adapt to any natural or man-made, rural or urban, historic or modern context. In this sense, the perennial garden stands out in any context without affecting the image, structures and specific character of architectures and the (inter)spaces between them.

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