The Care and Feeding of the Noble Allée

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Two of France’s most engaging seventeenth-century landscapes are once more being rethought.

The story goes that a certain professor of landscape architecture at a California university was dismayed by what a French student had proposed for her second planting design project. The trees were, in fact, arranged in two very straight and parallel lines, arranged in what in her country of origin is termed an allée. The professor’s sole comment was, “Hmmm. So you’ve lined them up again?” After a moment or two of searching for a more pointed response, he played his trump card, “But what if one should die?”

What indeed? He needn’t have worried. After all, trees have been growing—and dying—in French allées for three centuries, more or less. But questions of life process within the garden are central to any landscape design, and to some extent they are made more transparent in gardens conceived geometrically. When the pattern is apparent, the presence—or absence—of any single element is highlighted. If a tree anchoring the corner of a square is missing, that loss is more noticeable than one fallen within an informal clump. But in spite of the test of horticultural skill, formal gardens have been created in virtually every part of the world, either as domestic or imported products. Trees arranged in lines have constituted a central feature of landscapes from the tunnello of Renaissance Italian gardens to the allée of French formal gardens to the street trees of nineteenth-century American cities. Allées are a magical part of the formal garden.

But what if one should die?

Versailles may be André Le Nôtre’s largest work, but two of his most engaging designs are the gardens at the Tuileries and the park at Sceaux. The first has always been an element of the city, now circumscribed by Paris and the Seine. Like Central Park it is a respite from urbanity rather than a place where the city meets the field. Sceaux, on the other hand, located south of the capital, was created as an exurban estate to serve as a retreat from both the city and the suffocating protocol of the court. Today, it hosts dog walkers, runners, the elderly, soccer fanatics, model boat pilots, lovers, and those who derive pleasure from photographing long lines of Lombardy poplars.

The Tuileries

Until 1871, the gardens of the Tuileries spread outward from a palace of the same name, which had been recast during two prior rebuildings. By 1576, the château had already broken out of the enclosure surrounding the almost perfectly rectangular garden of the medieval structure.¹ The domain changed drastically with Louis Le Vau’s major building renovation of 1664 and the vast plan for the grounds proposed by André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), the royal gardener.²

Tuileries. The central allée extending the axis of the Louvre to the arch of La Défense. Many of the trees are relatively young (Marc Treib).

His scheme, which was more or less realized by 1680, figured the garden as a play of varied arabesques planted within rectangular parterres; the dimensions of each were carefully adjusted to conjure a sense of regularity when the site wished otherwise. Typical of Le Nôtre’s designs, many of the purely geometric figures were adjusted to counter the foreshortening apprehended from the palace to the east, from which point the principal views were cast. To disguise the slope across the site, banks were raised along its northern and southern edges. Ramps joined the principal levels and a set of horseshoe-shaped ramps connected the ground with the embankment at the garden’s western terminus. In Le Nôtre’s time rows of trees extended the thrust of the axis from palace to fields. Today a forest of regularly planted (mostly) horse chestnuts \((Aesculus hippocastanum)\) extends the line through from the Tuileries, past the vast Place de la Concorde, along the Champs-Elysées to the Arc de Triomphe, through the Porte Maillot and, as of 1989, on to the square arch at La Défense.

Le Nôtre’s vision was elegant, restrained, and gridded; architectonic areas adjacent to the palace gave way to bosks of mixed plantings. Here, horse chestnuts planted on a grid roughly fifteen feet apart (known today as the “Grand Couvert”) defined spaces within the larger space, provided shade as a respite from the summer sun and served as a screen for dalliance. As depicted in contemporary engravings, the design of the bosks was not consistent. Some were high, some low; some intricate, some simple. This permitted, within a structural theme, variation in form, use,
and amount of sunlight within an order immediately perceived. On the north terrace, silkworm-nourishing mulberry trees had been planted during the royal experiment to develop a silk industry. Horse chestnuts replaced them in 1677 as part of the great renovation, at which time spruce also entered the garden. In other parts of the garden, lindens replaced elms, originally planted in clipped bushes of varying heights and trees of varying species.

The Tuileries had traditionally been open to the polite segments of the population; in the aftermath of the Revolution the park became a National Public Garden. But political imbroglio nevertheless took its toll on the vegetation and the château. Burned by the Paris Commune on May 23, 1871, the Tuileries palace stood as a ruin for over a decade while its fate was debated. In 1882, the remnants of the building were pulled down, the site was cleared and reformed as a link between the Louvre and the Tuileries. In the later part of the nineteenth-century, during the reign of Napoleon III, the land that once accommodated the palace was reserved for imperial use.

Over the centuries various species of trees—London planes (Platanus × acerifolia), for example—crept into the garden although horse chestnuts continued to predominate.

In 1990, an invited competition was held for the redesign of the Tuileries gardens. While the principal instigation for the contest was the great renovation by I. M. Pei to the adjacent Louvre, the garden itself was in serious need of study and reinvigoration. The care of the garden had been attached to the duties of the architect for the Louvre; no master plan guided maintenance and replanting, and over time the grounds began to show the piecemeal decisions of generations of gardeners. The scheme selected for execution (by Pascal Cribier and Louis Benech with François Roubaud) accepted the Le Nôtre structure as a framework within which to work, but called for major reformations to the design of the bosks and to the ground beneath the trees. New pools were to be added, new bedding, new plantings, new modulations of the ground plane; all within Le Nôtre's prevalent structure.

The results appear, at first glance, to be conservative and archaeologically pure, with a prevalent formality that conforms to the historical structure of the park. But with a more careful viewing, one finds changes effected at the level of horticultural execution.

Within the bosk areas, for example, new plantings of linear hedges will softly articulate the space beneath the trees. Most of these lines will remain low, planted with Alexandrian laurel (Danae racemosa), flowering raspberry (Rubus odoratus), and cranesbill geranium (Geranium macrorhizum). In certain areas, however, the vegetation will form a true hedge. The proposed lines of hedges will be
purposely overwatered and used as irrigation for the horse chestnuts, which have not prospered in the polluted Parisian air, a problem compounded by relatively dry summers of late.

The landscape architects have also produced a protocol for maintenance and restoration to guide future work within the gardens. Having been a royal domain, the Tuileries remains directly under the administration of the Ministry of Culture’s Department of Preservation, and prior to the competition there had been no firm policy for maintaining the integrity of the Le Nôtre or any other design. Instead, as is so often the case, the decisions were made by the gardeners on a day-to-day, item-by-item basis. Historically, the royal gardeners seemed more interested in sustaining a planted rhythm than in maintaining a species-pure planting. Although the gardens have relied on horse chestnuts, a number of alien species have been planted: one London plane, for example, is dated as about one-hundred-fifty years old. Other species were planted as the horse chestnuts were lost.¹⁰

Policy toward planting continues to evolve. Mr. Jean Schnebelen, technical director for the Department of the Hauts-de-Seine’s Espaces Verts [forests, parks, and gardens], noted that the horse chestnut, long the mainstay of French parks and formal gardens, is becoming increasingly more difficult to procure; nurseries prefer to cultivate lindens, and hence, these are more available. Horse chestnuts are also plagued by a fungus that appears at the end of the growing season and whose effect is only too noticeable in the brown edging of the leaves in late summer and autumn. In place of the golden tones taken by their northern cousins, in Scandinavia for example, the canopies...
of the trees in the Paris area appear as an unattractive agglomeration of dun-toned pennants hanging limply from their branches.

Today, the multiple allées are far from pure in family and age, although the effect of the gridded bosks overwhelms these disparities. Only the specialist would notice that all is not coherent in the state of the Tuileries; the Le Nôtre structure predominates.

**Sceaux**

If the Tuileries is an urbane and restrained green setting in which the city echoes, the park at Sceaux is a gash of geometric order incised into the countryside. The château one sees today is not the original built around 1670 by the same Jean-Baptiste Colbert who managed the seventeenth-century renovation of the Tuileries gardens. That structure, like the palace of the Tuileries, was destroyed in the last century. The existing building, an emblem of the decline in taste and means in the centuries that followed in the wake of the Grand Siècle, is undersized and meager in comparison to the park itself.

At the request of Colbert’s son the Marquis de Seignelay, Le Nôtre executed major renovations and additions to the gardens from 1685 to 1696.\(^\text{11}\) The cross axis, set parallel to the château terrace, was strengthened by a new and quite Grand Canal, which collected groundwater while contributing to the garden an enormous mirror in which to reflect the skies and the glory of the patron. In the earliest existing plan, which dates from 1730, the triple allées of trees surrounding the Grand Canal are carefully delineated, but the species of tree intended by the landscape architect cannot be ascertained with any precision. They are rendered only as generic shapes; no specif-
ics are listed. Perhaps the available or acceptable species were so well established that there was no need to note them. Perhaps the landscape architect was more interested in the structural and spatial purposes served by the long rows of trees and less interested in the means by which to realize them. Elm, horse chestnut, and slightly later, linden, were frequently used in formal gardens such as these, and one can assume that at least one of these species would have been used at Sceaux (that is, if the allées were ever planted in their entirety).

Whatever the species, the trees had long deteriorated by the first decades of this century. By the 1920s the entire park was in desperate condition. Segments of the stone walls of the Grand Canal had collapsed, and only scrubby planting maintained the lines intended by Le Nôtre. The site was considered a health hazard, the canal waters were stagnant and fetid, and the once majestic water feature was caustically described as "an open sewer."

Ownership of the park was transferred from private ownership to the Department of the Seine in 1923, and the public cry for greater attention ultimately resulted in a major refurbishing of the park. The canal, which had been the target of public abuse, was drained, rebuilt, and waterproofed, an allée of Lombardy poplars was planted to ring the canal. The refurbished park was officially opened in 1935. The landscape designer Russell Page, visiting Sceaux in the mid-1930s, could report: "Now the canal has been cleaned; lines of Lombardy poplars have been planted down each side and there are boats and facilities for swimming. The work continues and, by degrees, as much of the old Park as possible will be developed in playing fields and tennis courts." By the end of the 1930s the trees were beginning to mature and by the close of the following decade, they began to display signs of the majestic scale they possess today.

*Populus nigra* 'Italica' entered France for the first time only in the mid-eighteenth century, that is, long after Le Nôtre. Thus there was no historical precedent for this choice of tree. But today the poplars are so dense, dramatic, and architectonic, that it is difficult to conceive of the canal without them. The Lombardy poplar is a tree accepted by gardeners but adored by architects. Cylindrical in shape with relatively quick growth and heights up to one-hundred feet, the Lombardy poplar is the perfect ingredient with which to create green architecture. It also appeals to those who would realize a regrowth quickly. On the down side, the structure of its wood is brittle, the tree is relatively short-lived, and its roots can be invasive. They tend to destroy foundations like canal walls although this has not been a problem at Sceaux after the work in the 1930s.

Within the last few years, the poplars have matured to a point where their continued existence has become questionable. At sixty-five-plus years, they have nearly reached the...
Sceaux. The Grand Canal, derelict, in 1924 (Musée de l’Ile de France).

Sceaux. The Grand Canal, probably in the mid-1930s, refurbished and planted with allées of Lombardy poplars (Musée de l’Ile de France).
end of their expected life span. A major storm in February 1990 destroyed a sufficient number of the trees to force a rethinking of the planting strategy around the canal. Sceaux, after all, is not a small and private garden but a major public park that seems to host an international meeting of canal joggers each evening as the sun sets.

In places, *Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata' (upright English oak) has been planted to replace those poplars that have passed on to allée heaven. Presumably its narrow and upright form while young made it a viable choice to substitute for the Lombardy poplar. That it may acquire a pyramidal form when mature seems to have been of less concern to those responsible for new plantings. In the interest of truth-in-arboriculture these new trees have been clearly marked by signs noting that the planting is only experimental. The experiment, in fact, has not been going well. According to Mr. Schnebelen, who is responsible for maintaining the park's vegetation, the oaks have taken very poorly and are, in many places, dying. No new solution has been found, and there is a possibility that in spite of their limited longevity, the poplars will be replanted.

For the most part, the poplars around the Grand Canal have been left untouched and are pruned on an individual basis as required. Certainly they have not received the constant grooming lavished on the linden allées approaching and extending from the château. These plantings (called *arbres rideaux*, or "curtain trees") are clipped annually when in leaf, usually between May and September. What was once accomplished with ladders, clippers, and a sort of whiplike pole with a blade at its end—still to be seen in use at Vaux-le-Vicomte—is now executed with electric shears.

*Sceaux. The poplars already mature, probably in the 1950s (Musée de l'Ile de France).*
Sceaux. Experimental planting of fastigiate oak, marked with a sign, 1992 (Marc Treib).

Sceaux. The Grand Canal in 1993 (Marc Treib).
in the hands of gardeners elevated in a cherrypicker. In spite of this contemporary technology, the task remains enormous given the kilometers-long allées that structure the idea of Sceaux.

The French, however, remain up to the task. At Sceaux even more than the Tuileries, the allées have received as much care as funding allows. In the summer, the shade of the allées at Sceaux provides welcome relief from the long day's sun. Like blinders on a horse, they direct—or coerce—the visitor to continue moving: first to the château, then to the cascade, down to the octagonal basin, and, of course, on to the canal. In winter the dense and intricate branch structures become sculptural forms set against the sky. In any season, however, the line of the planting and the rhythm of the interval modulate the walk of those who follow the directed path.

Is this, yet again, the French predilection for valuing geometry and architectonic purpose over natural growing patterns? Perhaps. But the conflict between nature and human construct does not create a major problem. Gardening practice will continue to evolve to meet the changing environmental, economic, and political conditions, whether in the use to which the park space is assigned or in the selection of species. The traditional allée will receive its care and feeding.

But, again, what if one should die? In some instances, the eye will continue what nature has removed; the mind will complete the gap. The missing element can, in fact, create a syncopation that enriches rather than detracts from the rhythm. A missing tree can actually contribute to a design, as a young tree can remind us of the life cycles of living organisms. And then, if one should die, you can always plant a new one.

Notes


2 The project for château and garden was conceived by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Secretary of State and Director of Public Works to Louis XIV, to woo the Sun King back from his seat at Versailles. (It didn't work.)


4 Today this overlooks and forms one side of the Place de la Concorde, one of Paris' most sublime traffic carrousels.

5 Hazlehurst, 183, note 9. Hazlehurst translates what was probably *sapin* in the original as Norwegian spruce. Louis Benech suggests that the species was more likely the native *Abies pectinata* (silver fir).


7 In the years from 1881 to 1893 this area was recast by château architect Edmond Guillaumé in a quasi-mirroring of the first panel of the Le Nôtre scheme. Thus, on the site of the demolished palace, circular beds substituted for the pools of water, and specimen planting gave the garden a slight flavor of the fashionable English and/or gardenesque manner. While a trifle discordant in taste and form, Guillaumé's scheme succeeded in joining the Louvre to the Tuileries garden proper through symmetry and repetition. His task was made more difficult by the extension of Rue des Pyramides southward to the Seine as Avenue du Général Lemonnier. The road effectively separated the Louvre from the gardens.


9 Sadly, politics reared its ugly head, in a manner characteristic of France but almost impossible to explain on any rational level. The Cribier-Benech-Roubaud scheme was truncated; Jacques Wirtz, another competition invitee, was given the design of the Cour du Carrousel. The two teams were thus forced into a marriage of inconvenience, and judging from the resulting design—the clash of competing ideologies was aggravated by the Pei terrace between them—the menage looks to be made for divorce. The reasoning behind the Wirtz
scheme is difficult to ascertain, and the relation of the radiating hedges to the embankment against which they will bump due to a level differential, appears clumsy at best. That the Tuileries will be designed in fragments is unfortunate; the opportunity to once again reunite the full sweep of the gardens has been lost.

10 François Roubaud believes that on average some fifty trees per acre are cut and replaced each year, and that as a result a considerable portion of the park’s trees is actually quite young.

11 For a historic overview of Sceaux, see Hazlehurst, 233-256.


13 Hazlehurst (234–236) believes this waterproofing to have been a mistake because it may have hastened the collapse of segments of the canal’s retaining wall shortly after the refurbishing. Root intrusion could have been the primary culprit, however.


15 Robert Riley of the University of Illinois has anointed this the Fragrant I-Beam School of Landscape Design, with trees and shrubs substituting for plywood and concrete. The Washingtonia palm is another I-beam par excellence, with only a small topknot of greenery to suggest that it is actually alive and growing.

16 Like most places in the world, the maintenance budgets for the park systems of Paris and the surrounding areas have been drastically reduced. The number of gardeners tending parks like Sceaux has dropped accordingly, making even routine upkeep a challenge.

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