1 What is it about gardens that you want to conserve?  

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Gardens are complex things however we look at them, and I suspect that for conservation/preservation they pose very complicated issues, often far less resolvable than, say, in painting or building conservation. So, first, it seems worthwhile asking, what exactly are the constituent elements of a garden that may have to be conserved, or rather, what aspects of a garden do we have to keep in mind when we undertake conservation/preservation? (This awkward collocation is necessary to distinguish between the different usages of the term in the UK and USA.)

There are many types, and it repays distinguishing between them: as in linguistics, there are different registers of gardens, and, while these may overlap on specific sites, their different uses originally determined very different spaces and treatment to which, as historians, we must pay attention. It is not simply the designers’ intentions that we must heed, but how those designs were used, and perhaps changed over time. So garden sites have undergone alterations – beyond the usual changes that influence how we see them – notably in usage and visitation; the formal aspects of Stowe have obviously changed during and since the eighteenth century, but beyond those there is the decisive change of function when a country mansion became a school and students used its spaces for a golf course, and again when the school grounds were taken over by the National Trust. Equally, the Bliss mansion of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington DC, while it may have occasionally been used as a forum for international events, changed fundamentally when it ceased to be a private residence and collection, and became a research institute for Harvard University that admitted visitors and scholars at certain times.

Types of gardens are best considered in terms of the cultural conditions in which they were created and established. My own attempt to register this range and variety of cultural garden forms has been explored in a book, The World of Gardens (London, 2012), where a series of gardens emerging from different cultures are discussed. Every garden has its own forms and can usually be seen as having been created in a given cultural style, dependent upon the period when it was laid out; similarities between different gardens may well seem identical, but on closer inspection respond to local and cultural influences. An Arts and Crafts garden, such as Hestercombe in Somerset, is not a Renaissance ‘formal’ garden and needs to be understood in terms of how Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932) and Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944) envisaged its forms and uses. A good exercise to sharpen your cultural diagnostic sense is to look at recreations of earlier elements (or wholes) and identify the fresh colouring.
that even the most accomplished recreations betray: for instance, the later remodelling of
the water parterre at the Villa Lante in Bagnaia; the parterres at Vaux le Vicomte as we see
them now; the work throughout France and elsewhere, as at Blenheim, Oxfordshire, of the
Duchêne family. Then there is the reformulation of Courances (Figure 1.1) by Ernst de Ganay
(1880–1963), a doyen of French garden history who employed Achille Duchêne to re-make
a stunning landscape; it is truly nostalgic of traditional seventeenth-century French gardens,
but its ‘modern’ spirit is also a subtle element throughout.

Gardens also evolve over time, with different owners who bring to their land and its
management a succession of ideas and formal demands. Consulting the maps of Stowe
gardens, Buckingham (Figures 1.2 and 1.4) from the early eighteenth century to the present
day can make this very clear, even if we may not discern the reasons for the changes.

This complicates completely, not just what we may call the Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879)
approach (attempting to return a building to one earlier, coherent moment in its history),
but any attempt to see the site in question as having a succession of phases and interventions:
how do you restore a longue durée? And what happens when an artefact – crucial to some
site – disappears or gets so weathered that it is indecipherable? Statues once lost to Stowe’s
Ancient Virtue have luckily been found and restored to their place inside the Temple, but
do we replace other items with simply ‘similar’ items? One of the earliest items in Ian
Hamilton Finlay’s (1925–2006) Little Sparta, Dunsyre, a wooden sundial, shaped like a
gravestone, carved with the words ‘Evening will come They will sew the Blue Sail’ is now
aptly – much weathered and barely readable; do we replace it with a newly carved piece
and put the first one in a ‘museum’?

Plants – I am no expert here. Bio-historians and historians like Mark Laird have increased
our knowledge of plants and their uses. And the commercial research and development of
plants make choices both harder and easier – more types to substitute, yet thereby perhaps
losing the claim of ‘authenticity’. Is even a fairly recent garden like William Robinson’s
(1838–1935) Gravetye Manor, West Sussex ‘authentic’? Does it have to be? Can it not be
allowed to develop with plantings that, while not the same, create comparable effects? If
so, how do we nevertheless record it and demonstrate it for visitors?

I have always been fascinated by how we circulate and move through gardens, how and
in what sequence, even, we respond to their different elements. Some designers such as
Humphry Repton (1752–1818) were particularly concerned with how, and at what point, to
bring people into a site, and then to lead them through it. One significant and unavoidable
issue today is car parks for gardens of the National Trust – how do we bring people from

Figure 1.1 Courances, Essonne, France (author’s own).
them into the garden, and what is the threshold at which we enter and know we are in a garden – a momentous event in experiencing most gardens? How is it different from what might have been an older approach? How does this approach and ‘entry’ determine how we visit a site? But it is not just car parks, but the usual plethora of amenities – toilets, tearooms, picnic areas, and spaces for kids – that have to be inserted into gardens and parks that once were private enclaves. Creative, new work can often sit well and excitingly alongside old (more of that in a moment). One specific problem I encounter is that sites open to the public tend to tell visitors how to negotiate their spaces, by providing plans, or narratives that require specific routes directing visitors in a precise, predetermined pattern. But a great many gardens impose this single interpretation when there could be alternatives.

No site is independent of its context. The views from William Kent’s (1685–1748) garden at Rousham, Oxfordshire, over the water meadows and the far hillside with its eye-catcher are crucial to the garden itself and have been threatened – mercifully so far unsuccessfully – by unsightly farm buildings on that horizon. Gardens and landscapes like those at Chiswick House and Strawberry Hill, London (the former in good shape, the latter to date less attended to than its wonderful building) are compromised by their neighbouring context: there is little we can do about that, but it does effectively manipulate our responses and presentational possibilities in relation to what was originally intended or hoped for.

This is why I was much taken with the ideas put forward by some Italian humanists in the later sixteenth century about what they termed the third nature. In order to comprehend exactly what a garden was, they saw it as a formal extension of both the secondary world

Figure 1.2 Stowe in 1777. Compare this with the 1739 view of the whole estate in Figure 1.4.
of some cultural landscape (towns, agriculture) and the ‘wild’ parts that were then untouched beyond. This idea is clearly visible in so many seventeenth-century engravings of estates, with the house and its ordered garden laid out around it, followed by orchards and less controlled spaces, all set within a less tended, if not wild, terrain. Each element of that large landscape – garden, usually productive context and broader context – is defined by the others. This idea of the three natures is diagrammed (it is hardly a sophisticated view) by l’Abbé de Vallemont in the frontispiece to his *Curiositez de la nature et de l’art* (Paris, 1705) (Figure 1.3).

Here, the immediate garden follows from the ploughed field, and its fountain is aligned on the natural spring that emerges from the far hillside. In charge, so to speak, of this evolution of terrain are, in front, the nymphs of nature and science, and, on the far hillside, what are evidently Apollo and the Muses who make clear and eloquent what we see in the world around us, the gradations of human control over the land.

A few years later the gardens at Stowe were created out of a larger landscape of woods and fields (Figure 1.4).

Generally, today, we are shown only the garden as a small part of a much larger engraving (the garden was big enough – not a site that can quickly be explored; but it is diminished if seen as but part of the larger whole). And coming to the gardens *proprement dits* through the woodland and agrarian landscape, we would have better appreciated its scale, its artistry and its difference from the estate as a whole.

A crucial aspect of gardens is that they change and that visitors see and respond to them differently at different times. I took up this issue, as best I could, in *The Afterlife of Gardens* (2004). Yet it still seems to be a theme more honoured in the breach than the observation: landscape architects themselves have started to think how a park or landscape will look and
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be used 20 or 50 years hence in terms of its materials and usage, a spectacular example being, for instance, the Fresh Kills Landfill site, a landfill covering 2,200 acres (890 ha) in the New York City borough of Staten Island in the United States. But those who work to ‘restore’ especially famous gardens, grapple, whether they like it or not, with issues of ‘authenticity’. What was authentic for Stowe in 1740 differs from how it was in 1820, and today we see and respond to things differently than people at those two dates, not least because of its immediate surrounding landscape and therefore how we visit it. So is it our authenticity that matters, or, say, Jacques Rigaud’s, when he drew the Stowe landscape in the late 1730s? Examples are many: the restoration of the Cascade in the gardens at Chiswick (Figure 1.5) seems very different to any sketched by William Kent – our own concept of the picturesque has perhaps intervened and intruded.

Physical restorations modify how we see a place, whether it is in fact authentic now or before. A wholly different approach would be not to touch a building or site but to propose new forms, colours and more sensitive interpretations through computer simulations, where different solutions could be envisaged, either before or even in the place of actual reconstructions.

A huge resource for preservationists and conservators are the visual and verbal descriptions of specific sites (if you’re lucky) and anyhow of gardens and landscapes more generally. But useful as these are, they are not objective, so we should guard against any positivistic urge! Rather, we should ask what the writer or the artist was saying, and what assumptions they were relying on in themselves or in their audience. It is crucial to immerse oneself as much

Figure 1.4 Stowe, General plan, issued by Sarah Bridgeman in Views of Stowe (1739). The garden is presented as the ‘small’ element at the bottom of the estate map (author’s own).
as possible in the mentalité of a particular locality or historical period – especially if you wish to put back the items that provoked or satisfied it. 

One issue is not to rely upon latter-day terms to describe landscapes and gardens: avoid certain labels like ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ (terms not used as far as I can find out about landscape before the nineteenth century). Also ‘baroque’, ‘rococo’ or ‘picturesque’ are modern terms which – with the picturesque especially – we have debased and made banal and so are useless when we try and describe how gardens were in the early seventeenth century or to around 1800. This tendency is made acute when we read – as we do often – histories of garden and landscape art, where these terms seem to do service that, in fact, historical analysis should attempt without reliance on essentially non-gardenist terms. Historians like to imply that things get better and better: Brown improved upon Kent, both upon Le Notre or any Dutch gardener. This proleptic narrative is exacerbated in England, where the ideology of the ‘natural’ or ‘English’ garden triumphs over all, leaving nineteenth-century history in some disarray! The hold of Horace Walpole’s (1717–1797) Whiggish narrative is gripping, good for patriotism but not useful for garden historians of whatever nationality.

Remember, too, that garden history is an international field of study. Plant importations, the ease of travel to make sketches in other countries, and the circulation of plans, engravings and books have made gardens, for all their ‘rootedness’, wonderful examples of international cultural exchange. Yet, as garden forms and styles are transposed across national boundaries they also, intriguingly, may sport much more local colouring than we sometimes allow: the gardens of Massey’s Court, Llanerch, Denbighshire in the seventeenth century were an almost nostalgic reminiscence of its owner’s Italian journey, but surely tinged as much by local sensibilities and tastes (not to mention the exigencies of the local topography and its portrayal by an indigenous and somewhat naive artist). Its bland transformation into a sub-Brownian expanse of water and grass in the next century gave it a more ordinary air. In each of its two phases, local misunderstandings of both Italianate garden art and of ‘natural’ landscape are as potent as their appeal to originals!

My last point is more deliberately confrontational. Compared with Europe, with its longer tradition and establishment of gardens, the United States has fewer sites that solicit that concern, and also (I suggest) a much more vigorous profession of landscape architects making things new than in Great Britain. Where are the new British works and designers that we can look to in Europe – Carlo Scarpa, Peter Latz, Paolo Burgi? Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Stockwood Park, Bedfordshire, seems an awkward anomaly. Thus, it seems to me, the UK is more concerned...
to devote as much energy (if not more) to recovering an old and maybe abandoned garden, and in consequence displays a less vigorous and cutting-edge profession of designers to make new ones. So my title is meant as a challenge, in the face of a strongly atavistic attitude in the UK and its heritage-driven perspective. The British Garden History Society, for example, is both stronger and more influential than any named landscape architect and it devotes much of its energies to thoughtfully assessing garden preservation through Great Britain. There is, somehow, a preference (I put it crudely) to ‘restore’ any Capability Brown (1716–1783) landscape or dreary Victorian walled garden than to design a new one; plants are privileged over design; conservation over interpretation or new adaptations. The thinking that Niall Hobhouse is devoting to re-envisioning the gardens and landscape of the eighteenth-century Hadspen House in Somerset is a rare approach in British thinking about the land. If century after century had not been so endlessly inventive in Britain, there would be no gardens and landscape work available for conservation! So I do not mean drop courses in preservation – but have a much more nuanced and creative idea of what garden and landscape conservation could mean.

Endnotes

1. This is a reworking of the notes from which I delivered a talk for historical conservation students at the University of Bath; I have amplified the text, but with fewer images (as many items cited are anyhow well enough known).
2. In this regard questions of adaptation in gardens need to be thought of differently than in architecture: see my ‘Notes on Adaptation in Gardens’, in Change over Time, Fall 2012, issue on ‘Adaptation’, pp. 188–200.
3. Tom Williamson is particularly useful in discriminating, not only different uses in gardens and estates, but in registering how different styles of layout (rather than a uniform mode) could be seen at the same period. Edward Harwood, Tom Williamson, Michael Leslie and John Dixon Hunt, ‘Whither garden history?’, Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes, 27 (2007), especially pp. 97–103.
8. I have tried to argue how little professional landscape architects bother with this full and proper study of mentalité in my essay ‘The politics of the past in the present. The importance of history in writing about contemporary landscape architecture’, Die Gartenkunst, forthcoming.
10. This wonderful painting is held at the Center for British Art, Yale University; the later version is illustrated in my Garden and Grove. The Italian Renaissance Garden in the English Imagination 1600–1750 (London, 1986), fig. 113.