Note

Richard Aitken
The Garden of Ideas: Four Centuries of Australian Style

Architect Richard Aitken, author of The Garden of Ideas: Four Centuries of Australian Style, is well known to landscape architects and garden historians. As coeditor of The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens (2002), author of several books, from Gardenesque (2004) to Seeds of Change (2006), and founder of the journal Australian Garden History, Aitken has done much to put Australian garden history on the map. His recent book continues that important work.

In The Garden of Ideas, Aitken’s intention is “to open a conversation, one that results in a more profound understanding of our culture of garden-making, and one that leads to enhanced appreciation both of exceptional and representative examples of Australian garden-making” (xi). The book admirably accomplishes this in its survey of Australia’s ever-changing and complex garden styles.

While there have been many fine studies on Australian garden history, until Aitken’s book, none has attempted such an ambitious overview from the eighteenth century to the present.1 None has offered in quite such sumptuous detail so many thoughtfully chosen or well-produced images. And none has examined in such depth, or with such erudition, the nature of changing garden designs. In short, Aitken’s Garden of Ideas cleaves to all a garden history book should be: it is lavishly produced, contains thoughtful and sometimes provocative ideas, and veritably drips with beautifully reproduced color images. Moreover, the work informs an exhibition of the same title that toured Australia in 2013, an exhibition that no doubt did much to further garden history’s appeal among a broad public.2

In documenting Australia’s changing garden styles, the work’s nine chapters progress in a loosely chronological fashion. They situate Australia’s gardening experience in light of its European context (starting in the seventeenth century), before breezily analyzing its changing style through British colonization, Federation (1901), war, postwar prosperity, and our recent, more anxious times. While Aitken does not use footnotes, the publisher has provided all the references by page number at the back. Thus, the work will appeal both to experts and those new to garden design.

One of the real strengths of Aitken’s oeuvre, which is as evident in The Garden of Ideas as it is in his other works, is the depth of the author’s understanding of the intricacies of garden design. This understanding is truly extraordinary: extending from late eighteenth-century aesthetic debates on the garden to contemporary ideas of the ecological garden, all of which are illuminated by an incredibly detailed knowledge of local context, itself accumulated through decades of archival research. This breadth and depth of view are particularly illuminating as, understanding both local and international garden design trends so well, Aitken is able to demonstrate the extent to which international garden trends influenced local developments. Where another might have placed Australia’s 1970s and 1980s fashion for local planting within the trajectory of earlier twentieth-century movements in North America and Germany, Aitken’s knowledge of local context is able to prove that it was largely independent and homegrown.

Another of Aitken’s strengths is his ability to move easily between popular and elite gardening. He is equally at home discussing popular gardening magazines as he is distilling the tenets of postwar high modernism. That he accomplishes this in crisp, lively, and concise prose is all the more commendable.

Inevitably a book that purports to provide an overview of a continent’s four centuries of gardening style is highly selective. Some will question the scant attention paid to Aboriginal Australian gardening. Others will wonder why their region is not better represented, or not represented at all.
Still others will wonder where Chinese market gardening fits into an “Australian style.” These are probably valid questions for readers to raise, but in doing so they would miss the point of this important book. Its strength is its accessibility, in being a work that neither talks down to its readers nor assails them with technical terms or postmodern babble. It is, indeed, a work that can be read in different ways: through its images, captions, and text. Focusing on the text is perhaps impossible; such are the quality of the images that the eye will wander. Whether the reader is taking in a finely wrought representation of a flower bursting forth into bloom or analyzing a botanical garden’s serpentine-avenued boulevard, whether pondering a poetically phrased caption or considering the implications of that species introduced there, the images invite continual revisiting. Just think how lucky the exhibition’s visitors were to view the originals. In The Garden of Ideas, Richard Aitken has planted another fine study in an already impressive intellectual garden.

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Notes

Esra Akcan
Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, and the Modern House

Esra Akcan’s Architecture in Translation is a study in the remarkable migrations of modern architecture from Central Europe’s German-speaking lands to Turkey. Extrapolating from a linguistic metaphor, Akcan calls what transpired from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s “architecture in translation.” The author’s insight that the modern house and housing are two of the most contested constructs of German and Turkish architecture, and the way she locates architecture within the linguistic debates concerning translation in Turkey at the time, are brilliant. The historical material presented in this book, the extensive archival work, and the author’s ambition to devise a theory of translation, make it indispensable reading for anyone interested in the international experience of the modern movement.

The first phase of “translations” traced in this book began when Hermann Jansen, a professor of architecture in Berlin, won the competition for the master plan of Turkey’s new capital. Jansen’s plan for Ankara amounted to a German reincarnation of the English garden city. Ankara’s modern layout, functional infrastructure, and hygienic green spaces were meant to highlight the Turkish Republic’s project for radical modernization and “Westernization.” In providing a new history of this episode, Akcan is attentive to the discrepancy in the perceptions of the garden city in Germany and in Turkey. Although it may have appeared outlandish to a Turkish audience in 1929, Jansen’s garden city offered a politically conservative alternative to Weimar Germany’s modernist social housing projects (Siedlungen). The German professor had an inclination to design suburban communities, inspired by the local vernacular, even when his Turkish clients demanded a “cubic” architecture to showcase their own modernity.

A clear pattern emerges in these years: The Turkish bureaucrats recruited figures of professional authority in Germany, Austria, and France. Many of the new capital’s most representative buildings were commissioned to the Austrian professor Clemens Holzmeister and to his assistant Ernst Egli. The plan of Istanbul was entrusted in the 1930s to the French urbanist Henri Prost. These factors partly explain why the most stylistically “modern” of Turkey’s official architecture in the 1930s emanates an impression of academic authority.

The flow of the architectural culture from Germany to Turkey intensified after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, forcing the prominent figures of Weimar modernism into exile. Among more than two hundred German, Austrian, and Swiss academics and professionals, including about forty architects, were numerous political and Jewish refugees.1 The left-leaning architects and planners of the Siedlungen programs in Berlin and Frankfurt—Martin Wagner, Bruno Taut, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Wilhelm Lihotzky—were prominent among them. Not all the German experts who moved to Turkey were political refugees, however. Paul Bonatz, an influential architecture professor, first came to Turkey in 1943 to promote “the New German Architecture” under Hitler.2

Akcan organizes her book thematically according to the German and Turkish architects’ opinions about “translatability,” understood as a metacategory. She judges the first generation of German and Austrian experts, Jansen and Egli, along with the Turkish Kemalist bureaucrats who commissioned them, as among those who were convinced that “modernism was smoothly translatable” (1). At the opposite end of this spectrum she positions the Turkish architect Sedad Eldem, who, plunged in “melancholy,” launched a monumental typological survey of the Turkish house at Istanbul’s Fine Arts Academy. As a discursive construction, the Turkish house emerged in the writings of architects and hommes de lettres of Istanbul as a reaction to cultural colonization and top-down modernization. Akcan finds their work symptomatic of their “convictions about untranslatability” (215). She maintains that far from being the unmediated core of a native culture, the Turkish house was the product of a self-inflicted Orientalism, if not a sign of the cultural marginalization of Turkish intellectuals.

Bruno Taut stands apart from the other émigrés, since in addition to teaching and leading a state architecture office in Istanbul, he remained engaged in architectural theory. First published in a Turkish translation in 1938, Taut’s Mimari Bilgisi (Lectures on architecture) has been understood as a humanizing revision of the precepts of the modern movement.3 In chapter 5, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Architecture,”