

Park in Time – Nature and Culture Intertwined

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The landscape around us is covered with traces. It is like a stage, a showground where the performance of our everyday lives is enacted. Now and then, the costumes, stage props and genre change. The biggest difference with real theatre is that the ongoing play of mankind is constant – one act continuously blends into the next one, leaving behind signs and traces on the landscape. You cannot store the property from mankind's staging in any warehouse; the only way is either to replace it, rebuild it or take it along to the next act to serve a new purpose. Thus our surrounding landscape tells us about the lives and thoughts of the people who have lived before us; you only have to be able to read those signs.

This article deals with one kind of trace in the Estonian landscape: old manor parks. When travelling around Estonia, you can see here and there distinct and integral clumps of trees, often with alleys which lead to them. They are like separate islands in their surroundings – ambassadors from former times and cultures. Manor landscape is like a layer of our native landscapes, memories from the centuries-long time when the land was ruled by various invaders. The invaders brought along their own thoughts, beliefs and principles. As they built houses and cultivated land, they all left behind their own signs. In reading them today, we can find connections with earlier activities. This article aims to show how manor parks, initially strange to the local culture, have had an impact on culture over time, how they add to the diversity of our landscape, and how they ultimately merge with nature again, following the laws of nature.

Just as the architecture of buildings carries a message from the time of their building, a park is like a text that gives the reader an indication of the thoughts, beliefs and aims of its founder. Nature, being subject to constant change, keeps this text from being preserved without man's continuous participation. It will be legible up to a certain point, maintaining and carrying the idea of its creation, until it gradually regains its initial natural state, which persists without the aid of

humans. Thus, the creation and maintenance of parks can be regarded as a form of communication between man and nature.

Jaan Kaplinski (2001) refers to Claude Lévi-Strauss, who has claimed the existence of a universal controversy or opposition in all cultures – the opposition between nature and culture (*nätúra-cultúra*). Man has considered himself part of nature in some cultures, while being opposed to nature in others. Estonians have been known as a nation that has lived in close contact with nature and has spiritualised all of nature's manifestations. Ethnologists and folklorists regard Estonia as a tree culture; we have also been called forest people (Uku Masing, Oskar Loorits, Ants Viires, Hendrik Relve), above all because the most important factors in the living environment of our ancestors, hunters and fishermen, were the forest and the bodies of water located in and around it – rivers, lakes and the sea. Trees shaped man's perception of the world, they surrounded him everywhere, providing shelter and heat and the majority of his tools and commodities. The subsequent transition to a settled way of life and development of agriculture in the first century BC occurred at the expense of forests and the relationship with the forest changed, becoming more distant (Viires 2000: 8). And even though the start of farming can be seen as the onset of the development of cultural landscapes in Estonia, with the share of land converted from forest increasing and man increasingly detached from the forest, the forest has still maintained an important place in the consciousness of our nation.

However, one of the prerequisites for the creation of parks is certainly the preceding detachment of man from nature. Country people, living hand in hand with nature, have a personal and dependent relationship with nature and obtain their everyday subsistence by cultivating land, hunting for game or harvesting forest products. They do not need their ties with nature restored. Such a need arises in those who have been detached from nature for a long time due to their social or financial status, such as the nobility in earlier times or today's townspeople. The creation of parks is closely connected with the overall development of Europe – with how culture has conquered the wilderness and occupied an ever-increasing amount of land at the expense of forests. This has been due to both population growth over thousands of years and the resulting increase in population density, along with an increasing need for land for agricultural production.

Estonian manor parks are meeting points between the two cultures. Former landlords, living in a strange and savage land, created parks so as to surround

their homes with a world of their own, like a buffer between their safe and organised environment and the harsh and rude peasant landscape. At the same time, manor parks surely connected this land with European and world culture. Estonian parks both link manors with, and separate them from, the surrounding natural and agricultural landscape. A park edge marks the end of one world and the beginning of another.

The creation of parks always expresses the human desire to cooperate and communicate with nature. A similar mutual communication between humans and nature also takes place in wooded meadows, which are somewhat similar to parks in their nature and appearance. These seminatural communities have persisted in Estonia for centuries, if not millennia. However, one still cannot equate the two. While parks are created primarily for ornamental purposes, wooded meadows constitute a co-product of practical farming (Kukk, Kull 1997: 13). Yet they could be regarded as Estonia's 'own' parks due to their scenic appearance, their age and the significant richness of their native species.

Parks distinguish themselves in the Estonian landscape as valuable broad-leaved stands, whose native analogues are relatively rare. As the locations of manors were, as a rule, chosen because of the fresh fertile soil in the area, which was an important prerequisite for agriculture, the valuable broad-leaved forests that would otherwise be growing there have become rare (Kalda 1961: 354). Thus parks resemble our own native broad-leaved forests, which have given way to farmland.

Both the direct and indirect impact of manor parks can be seen in our farm gardens and town parks. An especially common feature in our landscape is the manor alley, which was usually planted with native species, such as lime (*Tilia cordata*), oak (*Quercus robur*) or maple (*Acer platanoides*), and later served as a model for planting trees along farmyard roads and other country roads. Alleys have become familiar to us, probably because they were used by both landlords and peasants, while parks usually remained more closed territories. Local country people, as a rule, did not begin to found parks following the example of manor parks. There are only a few farm parks in Estonia, and even those were born out of an interest in different plant species (arboreta and dendrological gardens) rather than the need to reshape nature. The growing of traditional farmyard trees – limes, elms, maples, oaks, ashes, birches and willows – is believed to be a rather old tradition in Estonian villages, but it is supposedly connected with old beliefs

rather than the model of manor parks. The same concerns the well-managed birch groves located slightly further off farmyards (Viies 2000: 166).

The influence of parks is best revealed in plant cultivation. It is expressed both in the creation of kitchen gardens, which is a rather late phenomenon in Estonia, and in the growing of flowers and ornamental trees and bushes in farm gardens. The hundreds of years of establishment of manor parks in Estonia have resulted in the introduction of nearly 90 different tree and bush species, half of which have survived the local growing conditions (Paivel 1960: 70). Non-native species have been selected mostly for aesthetic considerations, but also show an interest in the plants of other countries, which often accompanied the philosophy behind English landscape parks. Diverse vegetation clearly distinguishes the parks in our natural landscape. The most contrasting non-native species are conifers, with the most conspicuous species being larches (*Larix* sp.), firs (*Abies* sp.), Swiss stone pine (*Pinus cembra*), and white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*), but also numerous broad-leaved tree and bush species, outstanding in their colourful foliage or blossoms. Lilacs (*Syringa* sp.) and mock orange (*Philadelphus coronarius*), originating in manor parks, have become so common in our farm gardens that it is hard to imagine a garden without them. Many species that landlords have brought from other temperate regions of the world have adapted to our conditions and may even pose a danger to our native vegetation (Kukk 1999: 77). The way in which ornamental trees have blended into the local nature is vividly demonstrated by the Japanese rose (*Rosa rugosa*), which was brought to the premises of Kõltu Manor from some southern land by the local landlord and today decorates the coasts in the neighbourhood (Aulik 2004: 166), or the yellow locust (*Pseudoacacia luxurians*), which has run wild from the same Kõltu Manor and spread into the woods of Lohusalu, now the northernmost known location of the species.

In a semiotic sense, gardens and parks are multi-dimensional, carrying numerous signs and being perceivable with different senses on various levels. The creation of gardens and parks as an independent field of art is an object of interest in itself. As the aim of art, as a field of human activity, is to create situations and places for becoming detached from reality and, through that, to interpret or to explore the sense of the current reality, parks are probably one of the most broad-scale forms of art. Using the same materials as those that the real environment consists of – plants, water, rocks, land and air – an outdoor living space is rede-

signed for artistic purposes. As in abstract art, the aim is to allow a withdrawal from reality, to create ideal landscapes and a perfect living environment.

A park is a kind of expression of direct affinity between civilisation and nature. The original reason for its birth is never a single house (a villa or a manor) but a person, his thoughts, wishes and desires. What makes man surround himself with flowers, trees and shrubs? The aim is to create a space of enjoyment suited for meditation and recreation. Isn't it a kind of evidence of human effort to achieve harmony with nature, to reach contact with our native origin? The creation of gardens and parks expresses man's desire to get back to nature. The birth of every garden can be regarded as an attempt to restore the Garden of Eden – to recreate Paradise, the ideal living space of perfection, beauty, happiness and balance, where the human inner world is in absolute harmony with the outer world. As such, parks are like self-made means to reach our selves and our inner balance.

The word 'paradise' originates from Persian, where *pairidaeza* stood for a fenced territory linked to the king's hunting park. It was one of the first words used to denote an outdoor space carrying the idea of a garden or park. It acquired a religious meaning through the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek language, where it denoted 'the habitation of the blessed' (Thacker 1989: 11). The Florence Charter, an addendum to the Venice Charter concerning historic gardens, defines a garden 'as a place of enjoyment suited to meditation or repose, the garden thus acquires the cosmic significance of an idealized image of the world, a "paradise" in the etymological sense of the term, and yet a testimony to a culture, a style, an age, and often to the originality of a creative artist.'¹

As such, parks cannot be approached as original nature, but must be seen as an idealisation of it. They must fit into man's vision of perfect nature and an ideal environment. Ideals have been different in different times and that is clearly reflected in the design of parks.

Design as a language

The notion of perfect nature has varied over time. The design of parks reflects the canons of beauty of the time of their birth. The look of a park is like a language that tells us about the aims, values, and the social and financial position

¹ See http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/gardens_e.htm.

of the owner and creator of the park. Regular and free-style, man-made and natural, French- and English-style parks: these are opposing keywords reflecting and characterising the broader intellectual background of the semiotics of gardens and parks, the underlying ideology from which the park as a work of art receives its form. Two principally different approaches can be formulated. In one case, parks are created so as to perceive and celebrate nature. In the other case, natural materials are only a means for implementing the abstract artistic ideas of the human mind. While in the former case, culture opposes itself to nature and diverges from it, in the latter case it regards itself as part of nature and strives to approach it.

The highest level of celebration of nature and reinforcement of its beauty was reached in English landscape parks, which were established to create idyllic picturesqueness. Nature was the symbol of freedom here. This style was sharply opposed to the previously dominant Italian and French regular styles, which dictated to nature, forcing it into a framework created by the human mind. The English landscape park, on the other hand, literally meant painting with plants, with its keywords being freedom, cognition and poetry. 'My father compared the creation of a park with the painting of beautiful scenery and just as he was not afraid to make repeated changes on the canvas, he was ready for changes in nature, for eradicating the existing so as to achieve the desired ideal. The main feature that was to give the park its unique character and richness was the harmony of contours and outlines – the park's character could reveal itself both in the curves of pathways and in the placement of tree groups. Every natural advantage was to be made use of: every taller clump of trees, even the slightest surface inclination, every beautiful view, every play of light and shadow,' was the way Mary von Grünewaldt, the daughter of Carl Timoleon von Neff, described it, recalling the work of her father in creating the Piira and Muuga Manors in Viru County, Estonia (Grünewaldt 1887, quoted in Hein 2003: 284).

The regular, or French, style of park design, which preceded the biggest turning point in the development of park art and was characterised by neatly pruned trees and bushes and carefully manicured lawns, was also found in our manor parks, yet nature has always had more say in Estonia. This is due to the fact that, on one hand, this land has always been in a more natural state compared to the rest of Europe and, on the other hand, there has never been enough wealth or historical continuity here to maintain such parks over a long period of time. An-

other essential difference between Estonian and other European parks lies in the fact that Estonian parks have often been established by reshaping a natural area, while European parks are mostly planted (Tamm 1972: 13).

Nature and biological processes are co-authors of parks. Man cannot solely dictate the image of his work of art; he must also rely on nature and co-operate with it. How a tree planted by a person will take root, what it will look like, how it will flourish and how long it will live – none of these processes depend on human will only; man can only create the best conditions for them. Development and change are key words when talking about parks: parks are dynamic pieces of art changing over time.

Today it is very typical that the original force for creating a park – the manor itself – has partly or completely perished; often the only remaining traces are its romantic ruins or its park. In many cases there are just a few old park trees reminding us of the vanished glory. Being wild and romantic, Estonian parks often resemble English landscape parks, as if they were shaped like this on purpose. The difference is, however, that here they have taken the present shape through natural development, having long been in dialogue with nature. They are also diverse in a semiotic sense, allowing a much clearer perception of history, changes in state rules and the interaction between culture and nature than any consistently maintained park.

One of the most important activities in creating a park is the planting of trees, through which man seems to express his will, to establish a personal bond with the surrounding world. As mentioned previously, Estonians have maintained a conscious respect for trees, with particular respect shown for the ones planted by man. On one hand, this probably means respect for something that has lived longer than the span of several human generations but, on the other hand, the tree is a symbol which connects our real world with other dimensions. The tree presents itself as a medium of thought in a direct and obvious way, through its possession of trunk, roots, and branches. Other factors such as type of bark, flower, fruit, and colour all add subsidiary themes, as does the fact that the tree is a habitat for many other creatures. It also stands, both literally and metaphorically, as a living entity spanning many human generations. As such, it serves as a historical marker and social focus of events (Davies 1988: 34). The World Tree (*arbor mundi*) is an ancient and worldwide mythopoetic image, generally interpreted as the ternary structure of the World or Cosmos. The World Tree grows

in the middle of the World. Underneath and between the roots lies the Underworld, the habitation of our ancestors and of the gods of fertility and death. The canopy is the location of heavenly gods and creatures, while man's life proceeds along the trunk. There exist various modifications of the World Tree, such as the Life Tree, the Tree of Good and Evil, the Fertility Tree and several other sacred trees. Modifications include the World Pillar or Axis (*axis mundi*). This image occurs in old texts, ornaments, fine arts and stamps. The World Tree has figured in almost all of the ancient high cultures in America, the Near and Far East and in the ancient religions of nature peoples, still persisting in some of them. Due to this symbolic sense, a planted tree always carries a deeper meaning than might appear at first sight.

Estonians still have a much closer relationship with nature than the majority of Europeans. This may be why they do not understand parks very well and have less need for them. Old parks awaken contradictory feelings in us. They are kind of strange to us, but at the same time still our own. They have become part of our land and culture during the long period of time when we have had to become reconciled to the inevitability of any other traces left behind by invaders. It has also been pointed out that, regardless of the hostility shown towards landlords, no single report from the slavery period refers to the hostility having been extended to actions against the nature surrounding the manors – the manor parks (Üprus 1958), which, again, reveals the combined impact of different cultures. Thanks to Estonians' respect for trees, many an old park tree is still standing in spite of modern 'innovative' ideas. The author of this article, considering man to be part of nature, would not oppose nature and culture to each other in the case of parks in modern times, being of the opinion that parks as historical monuments express the diversity of cultures and their long-term interrelations with nature. Therefore we cannot talk about the superiority of either of the cultures: both should be regarded as our heritage, whose every form of expression deserves to be valued.

The park as a living monument

A park is a living monument. As it is built up of living material – trees and other plants – it is born and it dies, it grows and develops, being in a constant state of change over the course of days, seasons, years and centuries. The appearance of a park reflects the perpetual balance between the cycle of seasons, the growth and

decay of nature and the desire of the artist and craftsman to keep it permanently unchanged. Over the years, nature and culture in a park become fully intertwined. Parks symbolise the merging of nature and culture, both during their lifetime and also later, once natural processes have blended the signs of culture into natural development. The creator or caretaker of a park, working with living material, is in direct communication with nature. The visitor to a park also participates actively in a semiotic process, reading various visual signs, while also perceiving the park with other senses. Messages are carried also by smells and sounds, a fact which makes the park one of the most multi-dimensionally sensed works of art that man has ever created. The dimension of time is more important in parks and gardens than in any other form of art. In addition to sensual experiences, such as colours, smells and sounds, parks, as works of art, also enable us to sense the natural course of time. All processes run exactly at their own natural pace here, and it is not possible to accelerate them or to slow them down. Therefore, parks have a balancing effect on humans.

Man creates an artistic composition of plants, maintains it and takes care of it. At the same time the park lives its own life in accordance with the rules of nature, and it does not mind it when human care stops. Man, on the other hand, is able to find beauty both in a young, newly planted park composition, and in an old one, savage and dying. In a new park he admires the vitality of young plants and the purity of the composition, while an old park offers the experience of melancholic and romantic beauty.

Old parks remind us of the laws of nature and of the simple fact that all material values created by humans are subordinate to those rules. Old park trees once planted by someone have grown older than their planters, having outlived many human generations. They carry memories of their creators, caretakers and admirers. A park tree, having been planted by someone and being a living organism, generates respect both for the tree itself and for its planter. This is the reason why it is impossible to be indifferent towards old parks. Every park carries the idea and desire to create beauty around us and embodies the attempt to restore the contact with our origin.

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