



The Uncanny Garden. *Jardin-forêt* at Bibliothèque nationale de France

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Abstract: The paper is an analysis of the garden at the National Library in Paris. The garden (*Jardin-forêt*) is described as uncanny for it belongs to a long tradition of gardening but at the same time it turns out to be its opposite. The uncanny effect seems to stem from the tension between artificiality and naturalness which is at least partly responsible for the lack of enthusiasm towards the garden as it is proved by a quotation from W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*.

There is little doubt that Paris plays an important role in garden history, not only as a location for numerous historic gardens or parks, but also as a city where important contemporary gardens and parks have recently been created (e.g. Parc A. Citroën, Parc de la Villette, Jardin Atlantique, Parc de Bercy). Even though these recent projects have sparked criticism among garden critics, as usual—most have warmly embraced them.

However, there is one exception, which is all the more interesting in that it forms the core of one of the landmarks of the French capital, namely the new building of the Bibliothèque national de France which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The building itself has generated many objections. Indeed, its gargantuan corridors and halls, never-ending rows of desks in reading rooms, and modernist austerity which verges on a sort of industrial style, may overwhelm an unprepared reader or visitor who may feel—as the main protagonist in W. G. Sebald's 2001 novel *Austerlitz* states—'insecure and humiliated by this Babylonian, dehumanized environment'.¹

The association with the ancient East is reinforced by, among other things, the fact—honorable in itself—that the building surrounds a central, inner green space which seems to be a reversed version of the hanging gardens

of Semirami as it is below the level of the ground. That the huge green courtyard forms the library's 'heart' is underlined by the names given to the two floors (or levels) of the library: Haut-de-Jardin (upper floor) and Rez-de-Jardin (lower floor). It does not, then come as a surprise that BnF is proud of Le jardin-forêt (its official name) and their pride is not totally unjustified, given that the garden is one of the biggest—if not the largest—green courtyards in Paris, which, additionally, required a huge amount of engineering and landscaping effort, not to mention its conceptual framework. One would expect it to be one of the main examples of contemporary Paris landscape architecture to be discussed in books on that topic. Strangely, it is not.

The BnF garden is usually mentioned *en passant*, if at all.² There might be two motives behind its general exclusion: one is a lack of enthusiasm towards the garden, which would mean that it shares the fate of the building casting its unfavourable shadow on it; the other is that some reduce the BnF garden to a nature reserve (it is, rather, supposed to be a forest, as its name suggests). Both approaches have their good reasons, but are somehow too restrictive, for they ignore what seems to be its most interesting aspect, its uncanniness.

Dominique Perrault, the architect of the BnF and its garden, gave an outline of his idea on several occasions:

We have created a fraction of a forest at the heart of the Bibliothèque nationale. We have created this piece of a forest just as one creates a building, i.e. using cranes, laying foundations, and with all that which is involved in raising a building. And yet it is a piece of nature that has appeared.

It is a piece of a totally artificial nature that has been, as it were, reconstituted at the heart of Paris, and as no one can enter it, it is a place where calm reigns. This garden has been conceived of as a casing or a box. It resembles a lot the frescos painted in the ancient Bibliothèque nationale in rue de Richelieu which represent a mythical nature.

From the very beginning I have explained that this idea of a piece of a wild, almost inaccessible nature is a sort of rare book, which we know to exist and which we cannot touch lest we destroy it. However, this space has more than this poetic dimension as it has other functions, too: it is supposed to filter light and to create room among reading rooms.³

The above lines describe the garden as it was and is supposed to be. Let me now borrow a description of the jardin-forêt from Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, which describes what it is like (at least to its protagonist Austerlitz's eyes):

[T]he inner courtyard and the curious nature reserve cut, so to speak, from the surface of the promenade deck and sunk two or three stories

deep, which has been planted with about a hundred full-grown stone pines from the Forêt de Bord transported (...) to this place of banishment. If one looks down from the deck at the spreading gray-green crowns of the trees, some of which perhaps are still thinking of their home in Normandy, it is like looking across an uneven expanse of moorland, while from the reading room you can see only the blotched red trunks which, although fixed in place with steel hawsers rising at an oblique angle, sway slightly back and forth on stormy days like waterweed in an aquarium. (...) I sometimes felt (...) as if, always on the edge of invisibility, I saw dodging now here, now there, those two mythical squirrels said to have been brought to the library in the hope that they will increase and multiply, founding a large colony of their species in this artificial pine grove to entertain any readers who look up from their books now and then. And several times (...) birds which had lost their way in the library forest flew into the mirror images of the trees in the reading room windows, struck the glass with a dull thud, and fell lifeless to the ground.⁴

It is precisely the contrast between Perrault's utopian conception and Austerlitz's dystopian impression that makes the BnF garden so intriguing. Seen through this sebalidian protagonist's eyes, the architect's idea, which belongs to one of the earliest and familiar traditions of landscaping and gardening, suddenly appears strange and disturbing. In a word, *jardin-forêt* turns out to be uncanny. To some extent, this unfamiliarity was in fact desired by the architect who wanted his project to be—at least judging by the numbers—unheard of before.⁵ However, this uncanny effect is probably responsible for the lack of general interest in the BnF garden. Its uncanniness operates on different levels here, the main one being the relationship—crucial for every garden and underlined by Perrault himself—between artificiality and naturalness. This tension between artificiality and naturalness is underlined by the name of the place, *jardin-forêt*, (garden-forest), which is an oxymoron as the terms 'garden' and 'forest' are antonyms, the former being artificial, non-natural (in the sense that 'nature does not make a garden' as Emile Chartier, the French philosopher known as Alain, once remarked) and the latter being natural, non-artificial.⁶

The architect's original intention was to transplant a small section of an existing wood (including not only mature trees, but also soil) from Fontainebleau. As this turned out to be technically impossible, he resorted to planting more than a hundred single mature pine trees in such a way as to recreate the Normandy landscape from which they had been removed. Old trees were supposed to grow amid younger and smaller ones. Additionally, several other species were used (oaks, hornbeams, birches), while others were banned. The undergrowth was made of ferns, heathers, blueberry plants and a variety of wood flowers. Moreover, rocks were added to complete the landscape.

However, before all this could be done, the place had had to be adjusted: a three metre ditch was dug in the rock which was then filled with various types of soil and a drainage system, making the terrain slightly undulating. The surface of the garden is 12.000 square meters, of which nearly 10.500 is occupied by the forest surrounded by a pathway along the walls.⁷

The garden-forest is now a sort of nature reserve where about 250 trees grow (some of them grew up spontaneously, e.g. wild cherry trees, elderberries, poplars), providing habitat for wild species (birds, spiders, butterflies). The area is cared for by gardeners and specialists from the National Museum of Natural History in Paris and surveyed by *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux* (thanks to whom bird-shaped stickers were put on windowpanes to prevent birds from flying into them).

Given that the BnF garden is closed to the public except on the rare occasions when a guided tour is organized, the only way to experience it is to look at it. There are several ways to do this: one can observe the garden from above, from the deck or terraces on the upper floor. Or one can view it through the windows, either on the upper floor which is at the level of the treetops, or on the ground floor, which allows one to examine the trees from below.

While reading all this information or checking out the green space at the BnF, one might actually forget that this is an artificial creation. Given Perrault's many declarations, the visibility of metal ropes supporting trees that are too slender to 'naturally' withstand storms, and the windows' falcon-like stickers, which refer to real birds; one is quickly reminded otherwise. In a way, Perrault intended his project to prove human beings' ability to artificially recreate nature (again, a century-old ideal). Once it was realized, however, the architect's idea remained unfulfilled, which is precisely what provokes its so-called 'uncanny valley effect', as the garden is simultaneously too natural and too artificial. To put it another way, the garden contains too much natural landscape and too much architecture.

One does not know whether to treat this garden as 'art seen as nature' or 'nature seen as art'. Either way, when we approach gardens, we typically employ one of these views, which grossly correspond to two garden 'models', the architectonic (or French one) and the picturesque (or English one).⁸ Given this garden's ambiguity, one really does not know how to interpret what lies behind the window—it is neither garden, nor forest. Such a hesitation need not be disturbing. Since it can be part of the pleasure a garden prompts. That the BnF garden provokes the uncanny valley effect indicates that the artificial recreation of nature is unsuccessful, at least aesthetically. It is too cultivated to be a forest, and not cultivated enough to be a garden in any way other than 'in name'.

There is another source of the uncanniness, namely the fact that—as noted above—it features many elements typical of garden designs, but in ways that somehow turn into their opposites (e.g. the reversed version of a hanging

garden mentioned above). In other words, garden elements are not what they appear to be, and vice versa. This may explain why something as familiar as a garden-forest appears so unfamiliar here. In what follows, I compare the *jardin-forêt* to a variety of functions traditionally associated with gardens in order to explore how this garden's uncanniness has been produced.

Despite its innovative character, the BnF garden is fairly traditional in the sense that it is intimately linked to architecture. Gardens typically surround buildings, yet the *jardin-forêt* is surrounded by its buildings. Moreover, gardens usually serve as intermediary spaces between buildings and the more distant landscape. Here, this relationship is also reversed. Since the BnF building's perpendicular sections are situated between the courtyard and its urban environment, they function more like barriers protecting a forest from its alien surroundings than some mediator bridging them.

The relationship between architecture and garden is reversed in yet another sense. Since the renaissance, gardens have provided a spatial context for architecture (the opposite has rarely been done). In the case of the BnF architecture, the building's material and conceptual framework cannot be removed from either one's actual experience of the garden (the architecture offers an omnipresent background) or one's reflection on it (all thoughts must account for the way that it was created). Yet another unresolved question arises: is this a library in a garden or a garden in a library?

In the final analysis, the above issue concerns the relationship between the inside and the outside. Obviously, a garden may be located outside, *en plein air*, or inside, in a glasshouse. Very rarely, if ever, is a garden simultaneously inside and outside. This, however, is the BnF garden's condition for several reasons. One reason is that it is so extensively dwarfed by its architecture that—in spite of its being in the open air—it seems to be located in an architectural interior made of glass in which the roof is only temporarily missing. In a way, the architectural 'casing' of the garden makes it appear as nothing more than a sort of 'aquarium' (Perrault describes it as a 'sea of trees') or a 'terrarium', thus highlighting the garden's land-art-like character. Two authors even coined the term 'silvarium' to designate this forest behind glass (*silva* being Latin for forest).⁹

Another point worth mentioning is the way one's experience of the building evokes a Möbius-strip. So long as one cannot enter the BnF garden, one cannot experience it as one normally would (i.e. in an embodied way, strolling around with all of one's senses), which is disturbing in itself. One is thus forced to look at it from the outside, trapped indoors. At the same time, the garden is an outdoor garden which is inside the building. As a consequence, it is impossible to discover the location of the BnF building's indoor and outdoor spaces and whether the garden is really an outdoor one or an indoor one.

The terrarium metaphor recalls another point of reference for the BnF garden, namely the museum of natural history (e.g. the one in Paris with its

Jardin des Plantes). The garden-forest seen through the windows appears to be a sort of living exhibition featuring animal ‘actors’ inhabiting a vegetal stage. In this sense, the BnF garden is a particular botanical garden which again seems unusual, since it is a collection of endemic and ordinary species, rather than precious, exotic ones. Moreover, it is far too uncultivated to be considered an actual botanical garden, which typically double as urban green space and are therefore accessible to the wider public, not just specialists.

This leads to one last possibility: the garden-forest serves as a nature reserve on display. As such, it is meant to recreate a real Normandy landscape. When one observes it through the windows, one is thus asked to forget not only that he/she is in a library but that this library is in Paris. What is missing most from this natural landscape, remade on another spot in the ‘age of mechanical reproduction’, is its *genius loci*, or its aura, which Walter Benjamin famously noted exhibited things inevitably lose. One can never actually forget where one is, let alone what one is watching. This garden-forest is thus merely an image, a copy designed to replace some original, which—ecologically speaking—is supposed to be better for it, eternally encased in its human-free environment. In a word, it is a Baudrillardian simulacrum, a copy without an original.

The above remarks may sound critical and in part they are. Nonetheless, no such criticism can preclude the fact that *jardin-forêt* raises several important theoretical issues, which in turn does not mean that it cannot be critically appreciated as a highly debatable project—to say the least—whose theoretical underpinnings and actual creation prompt incessant reflection. One example suffices.

Even if one finds the metal ropes supporting the trees horrible and thinks—as the author of the present text—that such aspects undermine the project’s aesthetic and ethical dimensions and are therefore primarily responsible for the ‘uncanny valley effect’, one cannot ignore their theoretical potential. Such trees make one wonder whether they (and the garden-forest as a whole) are natural or artificial, genuine or fake. Or, maybe, such dichotomies do not work at all. It is noteworthy that the simulacrum pretending to be wild nature is surrounded by the library which is a product of culture. One must thus ask oneself—while looking at the garden through the windows near various *salles de lecture*—is wild nature not itself a cultural construct? Is it possible to observe nature in any way other than those already existing frames provided by books in the library’s holdings? Is there any nature outside the building of knowledge? Is it possible to step out of the library to experience nature directly, as it ‘really’ is? Should we not interpret the rigid, modernist grid of the buildings enclosing the ‘human free’ nature as an expression of the idea that nature does not exist outside of culture? Or maybe there are no insides and outsides, leading to the eventual dissolution of nature/culture, natural/artificial, and garden/forest?

Finally, one must ask oneself: Is there any better incentive to raise these questions than this view on a garden, even if it is not really a garden, few people admire it, and fewer still will ever enter it?

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NOTES

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sebald 2014. For greater detail regarding the BnF architecture, see Ameri 2015, Ayers 2004, Hanser 2006, Perrault 2013b, Perrault 2013a and Tate 2005. 2. See, for instance, Brunon and Mosser 2006. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Perrault, 2013. 4. Sebald 2014. 5. Perrault, 2013b. 6. Alain 2002, 15. 7. Nougarede and Alphan ery 1995. 8. Assunto 1994. 9. Nougarede and Alphan ery 1995. |
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