Historic Urban Green Systems – an as yet undervalued topic in the field of the preservation of Cultural Landscapes?

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Abstract

This paper commences with the premise that very few urban green systems are inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Yet, after decades of effort towards an accurate preservation of garden and park monuments, urban green systems in many countries are threatened by urban development, the construction of traffic infrastructure or inappropriate maintenance. Very few of these urban green areas are managed according to a master plan, which safeguards the historic value of these urban spaces. A first step towards the understanding of historic urban spaces, also known as urban green systems, which are a distinct type of designed cultural landscapes, may be the alignment with a typology. To this end selected examples from central Europe and some other countries are discussed and a typological outline presented.

This paper deals with historic urban green systems in the sense of connected open spaces like garden or park systems. On the one hand open spaces – especially parks and gardens do, worldwide, play an important role in urban areas for the recreation of the people living in their neighbourhood, but also for ecological reasons and in terms of their positive effect on the micro climate. On the other hand in many countries evaluation of the historic value of certain individual gardens and parks was established in the course of the 20th century. Historic public urban parks and gardens represent a very special group of historic sites for consideration in the preservation of monuments. The characteristics and special problems of historic parks and gardens have recently been described in the ‘Canberra Declaration on Historic Urban Parks’, which, after six years of research, was finally approved by the ICOMOS-IFLA International Committee on Cultural Landscapes at their meeting in Canberra in 2013.

The history of urban green spaces is a comparatively new field in the history of garden art. Dieter Hennebo and some of his colleagues in the late 1970s were the first scholars who paid attention to this special group of gardens and parks in German speaking countries (see for example Hennebo 1978), and Hennebo and Erika Schmidt introduced the history of urban green spaces into university courses in Central Europe during this period. Unfortunately today the history of urban green spaces has almost vanished as a topic from European universities.

Dealing with green systems, consisting of a series of parks, gardens, allées [pathways or streets lined with trees] and / or parkways in an urban context has in most countries not yet been a topic in the field of the preservation of historic gardens and cultural landscapes. Only a few of these sites are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Looking at some examples it can be stated that these green systems did not really play a substantial role in the nomination process of the World Heritage sites. They were just mentioned as part of the description. An example is the Ringstrasse in Vienna, Austria, created between 1859 and 1873, a boulevard with an
allée consisting of four to six rows of trees and several adjacent historic gardens and parks of major historic significance, which form a ring system (Hajós 2007: 83-102; Masanz & Nagl 1996). The ‘Historic Centre of Vienna’ was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 2001. Although this special green system is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding examples of its type in the world, astonishingly only in the short description of the World Heritage inscription is the word ‘parks’ briefly mentioned. Throughout the justification and the long description no further words or explanation of the green system can be found. At least this complete system of allées and parks is part of the core zone and the major parks are listed as monuments in Austria’s national list.

A similar situation can be stated with another example, the ‘Old Town of Regensburg with Stadtamhof’ in Germany, which was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 2007. The remarkable system of the allées which was created in 1779 after the initiative by Prince Carl Anselm von Thurn und Taxis, is not mentioned in the long description of the world heritage values, though this is one of the oldest green systems still existing unchanged in Central Europe. The allées are only partly under heritage protection. Luckily there is a so called ‘disposition’, a document from the late 18th century, which has provided continual protection of this green ring.

Another example, demonstrating that the situation could be more questionable is the ‘Würzburg Residence with the Court Gardens and Residence Square’, Germany, that has been inscribed on the World Heritage List since 1981 with some minor changes to the buffer zone in 2010.
Actually, the buffer zone in its latest version, only includes a small part of the so called Ringpark, created by the Swedish landscape architect Jöns Person Lindahl between 1880 and 1887. The boundaries of this buffer zone actually cut this park in two. Some parts of this Ringpark are mostly authentic, contrary to the gardens in the World Heritage core zone right next to the residence which were destroyed in World War II and reconstructed afterwards. However the authentic parts of the Ringpark are recently at risk of being used as a building site and for traffic purposes such as streets and trams (Czygan, Bausewein & Mayer 2009: 67-76).

Generally for a better understanding of historic urban green structures I would like as a first step to present more information on their history and development and to develop a typology.

Historic urban green areas seem to have been connected with urban structures from their beginnings. The first megacity of the world, the city of Uruk in Mesopotamia, was founded in the 5th millennium BC. Within the city walls was a belt of fruit gardens covering a third of the entire area – as can be read in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the world’s first great work of literature. In the middle of the city was a garden, which is known as the oldest designed garden of the world dating from 3,300 BC. This is one of the results of roughly a hundred years of research by the German Archaeological Institute consisting of 39 archaeological excavation campaigns. These results have recently been presented to the public in an exhibition at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin in 2013 (Crüsemann, van Ess & Hilgert 2013;Novák 1999: 337). There were larger gardens and parks existing in ancient Egypt, Assyria, and Persia but there is no evidence of a green system. Only in ancient Rome do we know of monumental gardens open to the public and also several large private gardens (Luschin 2010), which seem to have formed something like a green belt.

In Central Europe the first green belts of gardens came into existence in the 14th century, initially consisting of fruit and vegetable gardens. By the end of the 15th century most of these green belts were at least partly transformed into pleasure gardens. One of the well-known examples of this development is the circulus viridarium [circle of pleasure gardens] of the city of Nuremberg in Germany, which consisted of about 360 private gardens, owned by rich citizens and urban nobility. The first public gardens were closely connected with them.

One of the early examples for a public open green space in medieval Europe was St Peter’s Square in Basel, Switzerland (Hennebo 1978: 15-16). In 1277 the friars of St Peter belonging to an order called the Canons Regular of St Augustine, established a tree garden in front of Basel’s city walls. Linden trees, oaks and elm trees were grown there and maintained to offer shade for the visitors. In 1286 this square was claimed as part of the administrative area of the town and served as a kind of public garden and sports ground. After an earthquake in 1356 the square was temporarily used as a market place and regarded as a public square. Although this place was not really designed for public use, it was opened to the public a few years after its creation. Today St Peter’s Square in Basel still exists as an urban square with tree plantings, but rather altered compared to its historic appearance.

From current scientific knowledge, it appears that it was in 1434 when the first public green space in Central Europe, designed for public use, came into existence. The so called Hallerwiese (Haller’s meadow, named after the noble family of Haller, the previous owners) located in front of the city walls of Nuremberg was purchased by the local municipal government ‘allen inwonern zu lust und ergetzung’, that is ‘for every inhabitant for pleasure and disport’ as we can read in the historic archival records (Hennebo n.d.: 48; Ellner 1988: 90-94). It was laid out quite simply, with a large meadow along the Pegnitz River beside which was planted with several rows of linden trees and furnished with a number of fountains (Friedrich 1993: 26-28). Notably this garden was never redesigned and looks today very similar to its appearance in the 15th century. Originally it was connected with the tradition of the prati [marksman’s meadows] which were quite commonly connected with medieval cities, because the citizens had to practise crossbow shooting in order to be able to defend their cities. But most of these meadows next to cities remained undesigned and have vanished.

The early designed destinations for walks seem also to be connected with the culture of medieval cities. The earliest in Central Europe is supposed to be the so-called Buchenklinge in
the vicinity of Nuremberg, which was located in a belt of forests surrounding the city. Within the forest a natural spring was impounded and the setting was used for citizen gatherings since 1372 (Hennebo n.d.: 51).

Public green open spaces forming a larger system have appeared in Europe since the fortification systems had begun to be transformed to public boulevards and promenades. Several examples can be mentioned. At Anvers in France both the glacis (an open space in front of the fortified walls) and the fortifications were used as green open spaces. Another very remarkable and still existing example can be found in Lucca, Italy. The next stage of development within this type was the creation of public open green spaces replacing the fortification systems, the latter being destroyed to establish these green structures. An early example for this was Paris, when Louis XIV ordered the tearing down the city’s walls in the 1660s and replacing them with boulevards, which surrounded the city (Hennebo n.d.: 90-92).

Court gardens also have been opened to the public especially from the 18th century onwards. Several early examples can be found throughout Europe. The Jardin du Luxembourg, the Jardin des Tuileries and the garden of the Palais Royal are all three in Paris and all of them were opened to the public in the 17th century. Hyde Park and St James Park, both in London and close to each other, were, respectively, opened to the public in the first third of the 17th century, and approximately in 1750 (Panzini 1993). At the end of the 18th century the first parks designed for public use were laid out – but still under the patronage of aristocratic rulers. One of the early examples for this type in Europe is the Englischer Garten [English garden] in Munich, opened in 1789 – the year of the French Revolution. An early representative of this type, the Volksgarten [people’s garden] in Austria, is the Volksgarten in Vienna, built between 1821 and 1823 in the formal style by the architect Ludwig von Remy (1776-1856) by command of Emperor Francis II, because this design was more practical for the police to observe the people.

The first municipal parks in Europe were created in the first half of the 19th century. The first public park in Great Britain was Victoria Park in Bath completed in 1830, but it was not actually a municipal park, because the land was not owned by the city – it was only leased. The first municipal park of the new industrial cities in the north-west of England was Moor Park in Preston, opened in 1833 (Conway 1996: 9). In the German speaking countries the so-called Klosterbergegarten (originally named Friedrich-Wilhelms-Garten) in Magdeburg was the first park initiated by the administration of a city and built for the public. It was designed in the style of the landscape garden by the influential Prussian garden director Peter Joseph Lenné (1789-1866) in 1824. Subsequently a large number of stadtparks [city parks] were laid out. It seems that almost every town had to have a public park of its own. This type of park was designed in the mixed style with a general lay-out of the English landscape garden style and some parts, especially near the buildings, in the formal style. Some early examples from Germany are the Friedrichshain [Frederik’s Grove] in Berlin created in 1845-48 by Gustav Meyer, follower of the style of Peter Joseph Lenné and the first garden director of Berlin; the Bürgerpark [Citizen’s park] in Bremen, established in 1865-66 by Wilhelm Benque; and the Humboldthain [Humboldt’s Grove] in Berlin, also designed by Gustav Meyer in 1866-70.

Some examples of early public parks in Great Britain are Victoria Park in London, created between 1841 and 1845 by architect James Pennethorne (1801-1871), Princes Park in Liverpool (originally partly not open to the public) designed by Pennethorne together with Joseph Paxton (1803-1865), the famous and influential Birkenhead Park in Liverpool designed by Paxton in 1843-1847, Battersea Park in London constructed between 1846 and 58 by Pennethorne after the type example of Birkenhead Park, and the Crystal Palace Park in Sydenham, London also created by Paxton. In Great Britain improvement of the site for developers generally seems to have played an important role in the origin of many public parks, a circumstance which can be traced back to Regent’s Park in London laid out by John Nash in 1811 (Hennebo and Schmidt n. d.). Erika Schmidt in her doctoral thesis has scrutinized types of municipal parks of the 19th century on the basis of German examples and determined two variants, a more opulent one with emphasis on representative elements and a more spartan one, which attached importance to sports facilities (Schmidt 2004). Similar city parks seem to have been built all over Europe and the Western world with a common feature of being isolated parks, not (yet) connected to a larger green system.
An interesting fact about the Royal parks in London (mentioned above) that are open to the public (Hyde Park, St James Park), is that in the early 19th century they were connected to a larger system of public parks, or you could say they were part of a chain of parks.

In 1840 Peter Joseph Lenné submitted a concept he called ‘die projektierten Schmuck- und Grenzzüge von Berlin mit nächster Umgebung’ [the projected ornamental outlines and boundaries of Berlin and its vicinity] – an early plan for a green open space system which was never realised, but at least triggered the creation of several public parks in Berlin.

When Baron Haussmann realised his urban transformations of Paris he also included a system of allées and garden squares partly inspired by the green squares of London, which already had undergone a striking development in the 18th century (Hennebo and Schmidt n.d.; de Moncan 1992; de Moncan 2009; Longstaffe-Gowan 2001: 183-233; Longstaffe-Gowan 2012).

A very remarkable American example – though not the first in the United States of America – of this type is the Emerald Necklace in Boston, Massachusetts created by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) commencing in 1878. It consists of a chain of parkways and parks from downtown to the suburbs, including the much older Boston Common, Muddy River, Jamaica Pond, the Arnold Arboretum and finally Franklin Park. It might be noteworthy that by far the largest park of the Emerald Necklace – Franklin Park – is not placed downtown but in a suburb (Zaitzevsky 1982/1992).

The earliest planned system of parks and parkways in the United States can be found in Buffalo, New York. This concept, which was designed by Olmsted together with Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) between 1868 and 1896 served as a prototype for many park systems that were created in the following decades especially in North America (Kowsky 2013). At around the same time Olmsted was also involved in the creation of a huge metropolitan park system in Chicago – a project which evolved in the following decades (Beveridge and Rocheleau 1995: 84-87; City of Chicago ed. 1904).

An exceptional concept was to place a public green open space in the middle of a city, surrounded by major buildings as in the plan for Washington D.C. designed by Pierre L’Enfant 1791 – but carried out in a modified way. This central space was called the Mall, a term that is known to be named after a very popular garden game called Pall Mall, which was once played in allées or berceaux [arbors] of baroque gardens throughout Europe.

In terms of a central city park, Central Park in New York, also created by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux between 1859 and 1873 (Nehring 1979: 96-100) has a totally different landscape design. Because of the size and position of this park (approximately 4 km long and 800 m wide) one could speak about a green system of its own. Central Park has had quite a remarkable influence on park design in other countries (Kirchner 2002; Garvin 2011: 29-31).
Belts or ring systems of gardens have already been mentioned above, such as those which evolved from fortification systems, for example the Wiener Ringstrasse. In Vienna the former glacis, which formed a 300-500 m wide green belt with meadows, was in multifunctional use for centuries. At the end of the 18th century allées were added and it was maintained partly as gardens. After 1858, the complete area of the glacis was used to build the Ringstrasse and mostly covered with buildings. However some new gardens and parks were created in this context and connected with a boulevard, flanked by multi-row allées. The first of them was the Stadtpark which was laid out after designs of German garden artist Rudolph Siebeck (1812-1878) in 1862, complemented by the Kinderpark in 1863, which was one of the first public open space facilities completely dedicated to children’s play on the continent (inspired from examples from the United States).

The complex of gardens at the Imperial Hofburg in Vienna was transformed by Franz Antoine the Younger (1815-1886) and Adolf Vetter (1815-1891) and extended – the former redesigned the Hofburggarten, the Volksgarten and the Heldenplatz in 1863-1865, the latter laid out the Maria-Theresien-Platz between the famous Museums of Art History and Natural History as an ornamental garden square. In front of the town hall another garden, the Rathauspark, was established in 1873-74, also by Rudolph Siebeck. Altogether the Ringstrasse in Vienna inaugurated in 1865, lined with many grand public buildings and with its allées, parks and gardens forms a green ring system, almost unchanged and preserved since its creation in cooperation with notable garden artists in the second half of the 19th century. It is an important monument not only for urban planning, but also for the history of garden art and urban green. The Ringstrasse will celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2015.

Some interesting and further developed examples can be found also in the early 20th century, for example in Cologne, Germany, where Fritz Encke (1861-1931) managed to build a double ring of modern public parks with multifunctional areas – belonging to the type of volksparks – in the 1920s (Wiegand n. d.; Meynen 1979). Several of these historic parks belonging to this green system in Cologne are quite threatened today which is a problem facing the preservation of green spaces in many countries.
The earliest example for the new type of volkspark in Germany was the Schillerpark in Berlin, laid out in 1909-1913 after plans by garden architect Friedrich Bauer (1872-1937), who won the design competition with an ultra-modern concept. This concept reflected the problems of industrialisation and urbanisation of the late 19th century. For the first time on the continent social components played a significant role in the design of public gardens and large areas were provided for multifunctional use like the Schülerwiese in Schillerpark where a huge lawn was laid out as a sunken garden, which could be flooded in winter and used for ice skating (Bezirksamt Wedding von Berlin ed. 1988: 34-47). Also for the first time in Germany a paddling pool for children was integrated in a public park, following prototypes from the United States (ibid.).

The large and well known Stadtpark in Hamburg, which is also a very important early volkspark designed by architect Fritz Schumacher (1869-1947) and engineer Fritz Sperber in 1909-1914 celebrated its centenary in 2014 (Goecke 1981; Grunert ed. 2014). Here the tradition of the English landscape garden was completely abandoned in favour of a new formal design, inspired amongst others by the sports movement led by the British Arts and Crafts movement, but primarily led by functional ideas. Amongst other facilities for play and recreation, a large paddling pool for children was constructed. The impact of these ideas connected this new type of public parks with meadows and lawns, which could be entered by everybody at any time and used for sports, recreation and children’s play was of such significance that green systems became an important part of city planning since the 1920s. Remarkably neither the new type of parks nor green systems seem to have played any significant role in Austria or Switzerland in the first half of the 20th century.

A completely different approach was the idea of garden cities, which was of English origin. Well known precursors have been Robert Owen’s design for the model village of Harmony around 1825 and Edward Akroyd’s design for Akroydon, Halifax, West Yorkshire in 1859. From England this concept seems to have been spread out almost all over the world (Will and Lindner eds 2012). Some interesting examples can also be found in Germany like the ‘Gartenstadt Hellerau’ near Dresden (Will and Lindner eds 2012: 84-95, 118-127).

By the far the most famous, well known and influential ideas were from Ebenezer Howard. His concept for an ideal city included several public parks and open spaces (Central garden, Central park, Grand avenues), which were connected to an urban green system (Will & Lindner 2012: 72-83).

One of the most remarkable and largest examples of a garden city appears to be Canberra, Australia. The city plan was designed by the American architect and landscape architect, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) with his prize-winning plan of 1911. The plan integrates town planning with a complex green system of axes, water and natural hills. The city commenced development in 1913 and its green system, particularly its central lake system follows the concept of the original plan, although not in detail. The early inner suburbs reflect the garden city concepts of Ebenezer Howard. On the topic of the green system of Canberra, refer to Ken Taylor’s substantial publication Canberra, City in the Landscape (Taylor 2006; Will and Lindner 2012: 232-261).

Figure 5: Diagram for the “Grand Avenue”, in Garden Cities of To-morrow by Ebenezer Howard, derived from the second edition, published by Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd. in 1902, reproduced by eBooks@adelaide.
In the field of the preservation of cultural landscapes and especially in matters of UNESCO World Heritage, comparative studies are of exceptional importance. Unfortunately consolidated international studies on urban green systems do not appear to exist, but are needed to conduct comparisons. Some initial studies at the Institute of Landscape Architecture of the University of Technology in Dresden have shown that a database for this information varies in the different countries of the world. In some regions like Africa there can hardly be found any literature whereas in some countries like the United States almost every historic green system has already been scrutinised.

Generally in this context the alignment of a typology of historic green systems would be useful. Several attempts have been made by various authors to introduce such a typology. Richter (1981: 39-40) for example proposed a distinction strictly by shape. My suggestion is to have more phenomenological access and to give more consideration to the history of urban green systems. In this sense the following types are proposed:

- Ring systems, often developed from former fortification systems and containing parks and gardens as well as boulevards / promenades etc.
- Park chains, often also containing riverways, lakes, allées and/or parkways.
- Central parks & green “malls” in the centre of urban areas.
- Peripheral green systems / green belts, including recreation areas, woods etc.
- Garden Cities, sometimes combined with complex radial or ring green systems.

As historic green systems are substantial artefacts in the history of garden art and urban planning it would be highly desirable if they played a more important role within the limits of preservation of monuments and especially UNESCO World Heritage applications in the future.

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