

# The tree in the Paris and Helsinki areas: some examples of specific landscape vocabularies

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TIIVISTELMÄ: PUUT ASUNTOALUEILLA HELSINGISSÄ JA PARIISISSA

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The paper describes some examples from Paris and Helsinki areas, where trees are essential landscape elements. It is typical in France to plant trees around town squares, market places and along streets and roads. In Finland trees are almost always kept close to the house, together with other vegetation protecting the entrance and windows. These traditional uses of trees should be studied to serve landscape management.

Artikkelissa esitetään esimerkkejä, joissa puut ovat keskeisenä maismaelementtinä. Esimerkkialueet Pariisista ja Helsingistä havainnollistavat, kuinka eri kulttuureissa puita käytetään eri tavoin. Ranskassa ovat tyypillisiä puistutuksin kehystetyt aukiot, torit ja kulkuväylät sekä maanteiden varsille istutetut puurivistöt. Suomessa taas istutetaan pihapuita ja käytetään kasvillisuutta kehystämässä talon sisäänkäyntiä ja ikkunoita. Puiden ja muun kasvillisuuden käyttötavat sekä Suomessa että Ranskassa olisi tarpeen selvittää maisemasuunnittelua palvelemaan.

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## Introduction

My intention is not to draw up a list, which would of course be incomplete and tedious, of the different situations where the tree is used in the towns and villages of France and Finland, under some very different geographical conditions. I shall, also, be careful not to make any point by point comparisons between non-comparable forms of landscape. Indeed, these different forms are the results of different histories, cultures and sociologies.

So, each comparison would risk resulting in some partial and uninteresting reflections.

Therefore, I propose to analyze some examples of landscape vocabularies mainly concerning the tree, its species, the diversity of its forms and its functions. In this way it is possible to observe the differences of atmospheres created by the French and Finnish vocabularies, both of which are high quality, but which result from very different cultural approaches to the tree.



Fig. 1. Pruned trees surrounding the church square (Gastins, Seine-et-Marne).

Kuva 1. Istutettuja, huolella leikattuja puita kirkon vieressä (Gastins, Seine-et-Marne).



Fig. 2. Road to the Ecoublay castle with its trees (Seine-et-Marne).

Kuva 2. Istutetut puut Ecoublayn linnaan johtavan tien varrella (Seine-et-Marne).

## Examples from France

### The tree-lined walks and squares

In our Brie area, east from Paris, towns and villages are often very densely settled. Gardens and orchards are grouped on the outskirts. However, two kinds of urban areas are usually planted with trees:

- the square, often a central one, at crossroads, near the church, the public buildings and the shops,
- the peripheral walks, sometimes on the site of old ditches of the fortified towns.

The landscape vocabulary of such a lay-out is composed of a simple and regular geometrical network of trees, uniform in their size, age and species. But this apparent simplicity, and

even triviality, produces in fact hundreds of different atmospheres depending on:

- the method of management of the trees (pruned or freegrowing, for example),
- the spacing between the trees,
- the height of the trunks,
- the species, etc . . .

The castles, parks and grounds "à la française" have probably influenced urban tree plantations. They are, then, a 300 years old heritage.

Such simple, sober but very strong and very voluntary areas are places for numerous activities: the Sunday walk, fun and trade fairs, the market, children's games, morning jogging, car parks, etc . . . Here, it is the simplicity of the process which guarantees the polyvalence of the areas.

### The tree-lined roads

The lines of trees on road sides constitute another kind of typical landscape vocabulary, which is even more simple than in the case of urban walks. We are dealing with uniform trees, regularly brought into alignment along the roads.

These trees are usually left to grow freely. But in this case, there is no place for triviality: the site of the trees, their height, the choice of the species, contribute to making the plain legible, to permit the locating and rapid intelligibility of the landscape, of the winding of the road and of its different characteristics. The plays of the sun, the seasons, the cultivations along the road create, usually, with the trees, the richness of a thousand different atmospheres.

The first lines of trees by road sides date back to the 16th century. It was probably at that time a matter of growing timber for gun carriages, masts etc., but also a matter of boundary delineation, of providing shade for road users, etc. . . . Of course, the motivations have changed, but this patrimony has been regularly renewed, maintained and recreated.

### Examples from Finland: The private garden near the house

This chapter principally concerns private gardens in areas of recent housing, in Helsinki and its surroundings. Some simple and even trivial basic components will be analyzed to reveal landscape vocabularies, their meaning for the inhabitants, and to show their considerable difference with the vocabulary of the tree-lined walks and roads in France, which seems more cartesian.

### The tree with house

If the tree is, according to Finnish literature, very fundamental for the Finn's stability, it is quite understandable that it is always combined with housing. This is a strong point in Finnish gardens: there is almost always a tree very close to the house (often 0,5 to 4 meters). In the past, when a house was built in the country, a tree was planted, or a suit-

able one already there was protected; it seems to be a practice which has not been lost.

Those trees close to houses are high and their main branches begin above the roof of individual houses or from the 3rd floor of the buildings. The height of trunks has several important effects:

- very few problems regarding bulk,
- a narrow shadow,
- in an oblique aerial view, the town disappears except, of course, for its old centre. It is down there, below the opaque stratum of branches.
- from the ground, the branches of the high trees make an irregular filter softening the light and making the view to the infinite sky less daunting. So, Finnish people bury themselves in this maternal and reassuring nest, between the ground and the branches, protected from the sky - this violent and virile component. Climate is not a neutral notion in Finland!

### The windows

Windows also represent a clear symbol: they are a glance one casts over an outside world which is more or less open, but also a glance one offers to the outsider to make him enter and discover in it a silent message.

In Finland, there are no shutters, no complicated system of curtains, but three levels of plants:

- inside, on the windowsill, some house plants,
- outside, a web of climbing plants,
- further away the branches of a bush mixing with those of the "home tree".

A filtered sun, reddening thousands of translucent and iridescent leaves, enters into the house. As the plants are deciduous, the winter sun, however, has no more obstacle. So, the view to and from the window is a picture showing some living scenes of exuberant nature. But once again, there is no allusion to the nevertheless strong marks of society. One does not only erase the facade by the means of climbing plants, but one blocks its eyes, too!



Fig. 3. In Finland it is typical to leave large trees very close to the house. A yard birch in Käpylä (Helsinki).  
Kuva 3. Suomessa pihapuiden annetaan kasvaa aivan talojen lähellä. Pihakoivu Käpylässä.

So, this element of the built environment is, of course, an interesting and original realization of landscaping, which produces an aesthetic impression of high quality. But maybe it is, above all, the expression of a complex problem of communication. Of course, it may be more simply a question of protection, the will to see without being seen (like curtains and shutters). Finally, it may be the will to keep plants near oneself, this indicator of life, as a poetic barometer: indeed, it is the first bursting of buds that is going to symbolize the end of winter. Is there not, in the Finnish subconscious, a trauma concerning the uncertainty of the arrival of spring, a fear that winter will never end?

With regard to the "home tree", the whole list of local forest trees is used. Some fruit-trees are added and very few horticultural varieties. The danger of falling branches, a

"phobia" which in France justifies the mutilation of thousands of trees by the way of aberrant prunings, does not seem to be such an obsession in Finland. It is true that the shapes and species of trees used in Finland are often more flexible and have thinner main branches than the species used in France.

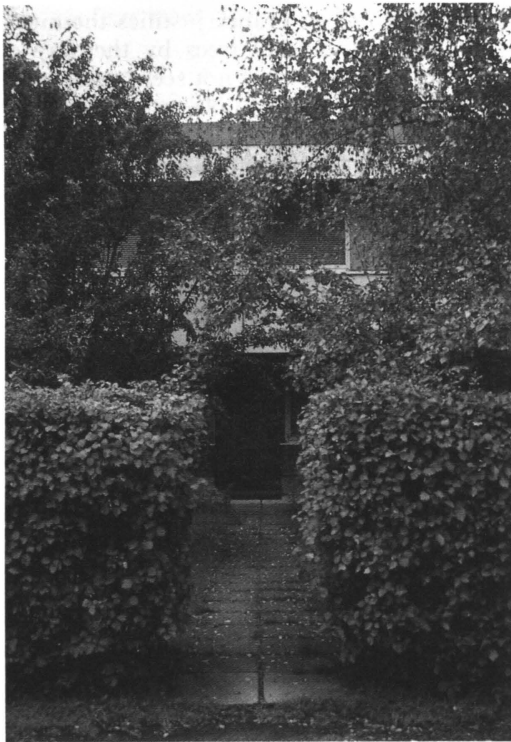
Examples of where trees are a cause of trouble are, however, numerous (they encroach onto the street, cross balcony or roof, they oblige people to modify their fences, overgrow the middle of an entrance, etc. . . ).

### Entrances

The notion of the entrance, in comparison with the French practice, is very ambiguous:

- The absence of a gate seems to perpetuate the country tradition of hospitality, but the door of the house, always solid, without any movable handle, does not seem to conform with the first invitation.
- A path, between the street and the door of the house, always short, very simple, straight and clearly understandable (often two lines of concrete square slabs of 40 × 40 cm, laid on sand, without cement jointing) shows the way to follow, but this path is made blurred, almost mysterious with the help of free bushes, planted in staggered rows, . . . and the intelligibility of the message is spoiled.
- An archway of trees in blossom, two short and parallel hedges invites us to discover, but the door of the house, out of line with the axis of the path and hidden by a pergola covered with curtain-like climbing plants, seems to contribute to a rejection of communication.

Do people want to hide themselves, to re-discover every day the symbol of a journey in the wild forest, which is, still, in their memory, and to cleanse themselves in this way? Do people want, unconsciously, the knowledge of the mark of the refuge to be reserved, only, for the initiated? Do people want, by this little walk among the lower branches, involving touch and smell, to show their deep attachment to the fundamental truth?



Max Guignard

Fig. 4. In addition to trees, Finns protect their houses with bushes and other plants. Entrance of a row-house in Kulosaari (Helsinki).

Kuva 4. Suomalaiset suojelevat talonsa puiden lisäksi pensailla ja muilla kasveilla. Rivitalon sisäänkäynti Kulosaaressa.

## The risks of current trends

### *Tree-lined walks and roads in France*

Almost everywhere, the replacement and the maintenance of these groups of trees has been neglected for 30 years, since the Second World War. We are now inheriting a patrimony, which is aged, declining and in bad sanitary condition.

Some severe prunings made during recent decades, have contributed to the premature deaths of many trees (rotten main branches, hollow trunks, etc . . .). As a result of the increase in the road traffic, in the car speed, of the widening of the roads, of parking problems in towns, these plantations are, sometimes, considered as something undesirable and even, perhaps, dangerous. So, this type of landscape vocabulary is threatened.

Finally, nowadays, the know-how concerning the choice of trees, techniques of planting, pruning and management seems to be forgotten.

To remedy this degradation, we have done an important work of instruction and analysis in towns and villages by:

- drawing up a rigorous typology of planted public areas, permitting us to precisely understand the used vocabulary,
- making a qualitative and quantitative inventory of the trees,
- suggesting judicious techniques of planting and maintenance,
- establishing a rigorous plan of management, which permits the consideration of felling, planting, maintenance and landscape planning.

We have also realized a similar work, but on a larger scale, covering the 30 000 trees on the roadsides of the department of Seine-et-Marne.

### *The garden in Finland*

There are technical problems in the regeneration of woody plants in areas adjacent to housing because of important modifications of the environment:

- the compaction of the ground underfoot,
- the sudden supply of light to the trunks and to the earth,
- the disturbances to the water-cycle, etc . . .

Generally, there is a loss of social and economic functions of nature. For example, recreational use of forests around the city is becoming more important than traditional forestry; in housing estates, ornamental gardens are spreading to the detriment of vegetable gardens.

There is a risk of the progressive replacement of strong, genuine primeval elements by a collection of domesticated horticultural objects thereby impoverishing the landscape vocabulary. The risks are manifested by:

- a standardization and internationalization of green areas,

- a progressive loss of symbolic meanings of trees,
- a loss of silvicultural know-how, which is, still, an integral part of the national character (for example, we begin to see some questionable prunings near houses),
- a loss of the notion of scale in landscape (e.g. planting little groups of flower bushes, using species of small trees, etc . . .).

There seems to be an irreversible loss of the symbolic value of tree and forest, which is, however, still deeply rooted in the Finnish personality, and whose popular expression remains alive and well. It is regrettable that these symbolic values are becoming outdated, static and non-evolving elements of folklore, belonging to reserves, museums and collective memory.

Lastly, there is a risk from another direction, which does not depend on any international influence. This is the cutting of the gulf between technical memory (which risks a rapid disappearance given the nature of the urban way of life) and the need for a symbolic expression (to bury oneself in nature, to cleanse oneself, etc . . .).

So, there is a risk that little by little a substitute for nature will appear (utopian and idealized, but completely wrong, cut off from its genuine roots, even more artificial, dependent and delicate than man's civilization). We see this problem in France: there, the picture of nature, not as being wild but as a symbolic ally of man, gave way, for some decades, to an idealized but impoverished picture of costly ornamental gardens.

The evidence of this risk is clearly visible in

the recent modifications made by the second generation of inhabitants in some Finnish housing estates of good quality. It is beginning slowly in Tapiola, for example, with the replacement of forest trees by a multitude of small clumps of bushes (Cotoneaster, Berberis, flower bushes . . .) without any other meaning than that of colorful decorative "wrapping paper".

## Conclusion

I have tried to show, by means of some examples from France and Finland, the concept of the tree as a basic component of a landscape vocabulary of high quality. All landscape vocabularies, even if they use same kinds of trees, stones and same botanical species, have their own personality, which is the result of local history, culture and sociology.

In France we have begun a typological study of these vocabularies (for example: tree-lined walks and roads). In Finland, also, there is a fundamental need to collect and to analyze, as in a dictionary, the basic components of the local landscape vocabulary, for example: the "family-tree" close to the house, the entrances, the windows, the rhythm of the trunks in forests according to species and sunlight, the graphics of the rocks, the play of water, minerals and plants, the colours, etc . . . With such a vocabulary, professionals would be able to construct a resolutely Finnish "grammar" for use in contemporary landscape planning.