

Back to Landscaping...and in style !

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In 1990, for the first time in France, at a prize-giving ceremony for town planners held at the Paris Pompidou Centre and on the recommendations of an international panel of judges, Jacques Simon - a well-known landscape architect - received from M. Brice Lalonde, the Minister of Environment, the top award for the "Best Landscape Design of 1990". It is interesting to note that this award will now be made every alternate year to a deserving landscape architect or engineer.

Although the authorities have not yet taken a vote to declare a "Landscape Year", the time for this sort of event is imminent since scientists at the National Centre for Scientific Research are actively researching the field. The electronic media have begun broadcasting a series of programmes on the re-discovery of our landscape, which has been unheard of since 1970. Publications are also on the increase: "Metropolis", a journal on town planning, will devote a whole issue to landscaping every eighteen months, while the Landscapers' Association, with their own publication - "Pages Paysages" - and others, such as "Autrement", have started putting out special issues on the 'English countryside' or equally relevant topics. In addition, M. Lalonde's yearly report, which includes a long chapter on landscaping, and the numerous books and illustrated manuals on subject, can be found on the stands of all book-sellers.

One does not know yet how well landscaping can sell, but it is much talked about in small groups of well-informed persons. However, a more precise definition of the term is necessary to throw more light on the subject.

Essentially, one must remember that the original landscape no longer exists, except perhaps on the slopes of some mountains. Since the days of our neolithic ancestors land has been

cleared to make way for huts or settlements, and skylines have been redesigned by men according to the pace and evolution of their activities. Various decors have arisen, reflecting the differing civilisations and revealing each individual participation.

Thus the great ones of this world have used their privileged position to create decors suited to their lifestyle. In the Royal Parks of the 'Great Century' our master gardeners/landscapers - among the most famous of whom was Le Notre, - were commissioned to landscape the parks, while on a much smaller scale less famous gardeners took care of the grounds of the houses bourgeoisie. Between 1840 and 1890, industrialists and engineers left their mark by way of factory chimneys, railways, steel viaducts or such objects as were synonymous with the progress of the time and were admired for this reason, thus causing the first French Minister for the Environment, M. Robert Poujade, to say that "landscape is a usable object". The Eiffel Tower, an unsolicited and initially unquestioned legacy of the 1887 Exposition, has been the culminating symbol of its era.

This time of rapid change repeated itself during the "thirty glorious years" (1954-1984) which saw many transformations in the environs. This time it was the promoters and contractors of low-cost housing complexes who made it their business to solve the housing crisis by erecting towers, to the delight of many enthusiastic applicants whose names had been waitlisted for the hand-over. Other corporations showed their prestige, such as the National Electricity Company, which between 1950 and 1988 installed 274 plants, 160 retaining dams, 2.5 million poles and pillars carrying 1,300,000 km of cable, 450 relay stations, 260,000 transformers and 8 million outdoor meters. The telephone company followed by putting more poles into the ground, while the automotive industry did better - or worse: 25 million multicoloured vehicles finding their way from the towns to

the most remote country areas, while 7000 km (soon to be 12000 km) of super-highways shot straight from here to there.

However, human nature is such that, unless people are forced into changes, they can not easily accommodate any sudden alteration in their familiar environment where it relates to their cultural background. Since the middle of the last century, voices have been raised in outrage against the treatment inflicted on sites and monuments in the name of progress, later echoed by touristic and regional associations regretting the desecration of some of the most picturesque and secluded parts of France. So, in 1901, the SPPEF (Société pour la Protection des Paysages et de l'Esthétique de la France) was formed and its first success was saving the Lizon waterfall from being piped to supply an industrialist. Since then under the "save our heritage" umbrella, the protectionists have waged war on the promoters and developers. They have gained Parliament's approval for the many Bills now controlling and securing our environment, such as the National Trust (1887); the classification and preservation of historical monuments and sites (1913); the conservation of natural sites (1930); the posting of bills -billboards- (1910 & 1979); the 1962 Malraux Bill protecting the historical parts of cities; the zoning of available land areas; the designation of national or regional parks, natural reserves and vulnerable areas; the preservation of the coastal areas (1976) which makes feasibility studies compulsory; an urban and architectural trust (1983); the development of mountainous and coastal areas (1985 & 1986) and others. Thus more than one quarter of the metropolitan territory is now being protected.

Although its means are somewhat limited, the Ministry of Environment, nevertheless, has great plans for the rehabilitation of fifteen large areas, and for an increase in the number of site inspectors and the number of studies to

be undertaken. Details for implementing the principal that "the polluter must be made to pay for the damage" are to be included in the "Green Plan" to be released by M. Lalonde.

In fact, the wind is now blowing in the direction of the landscapers, and at the ministerial and town-planning level, a small team has already been assigned to assist hundreds of distressed suburbs, not only in upgrading their housing schemes to match the current acceptable standard of comfort, but to change their appearance through an improved architectural 'dressing-up'. This, according to a recent survey, is greatly appreciated by the inhabitants who favour these improvements and obviously believe in the maintenance of public parks. Seventy five per cent of those questioned expressed preference for an improvement of their area as against relocation. It appears, therefore, that the beautification of suburban environs should now get the attention which, for the past fifteen years, had been centred on the improvement and embellishment of down-town areas.

At the Road and Highway division of the Ministry of Equipment, things are moving also; the new head of department has stipulated that 1% of the budget earmarked for road construction be allocated to landscaping while hoping, along the way, to add an Advisory Council for Landscaping and Environment to his department and launch various competitions and beautification programmes.

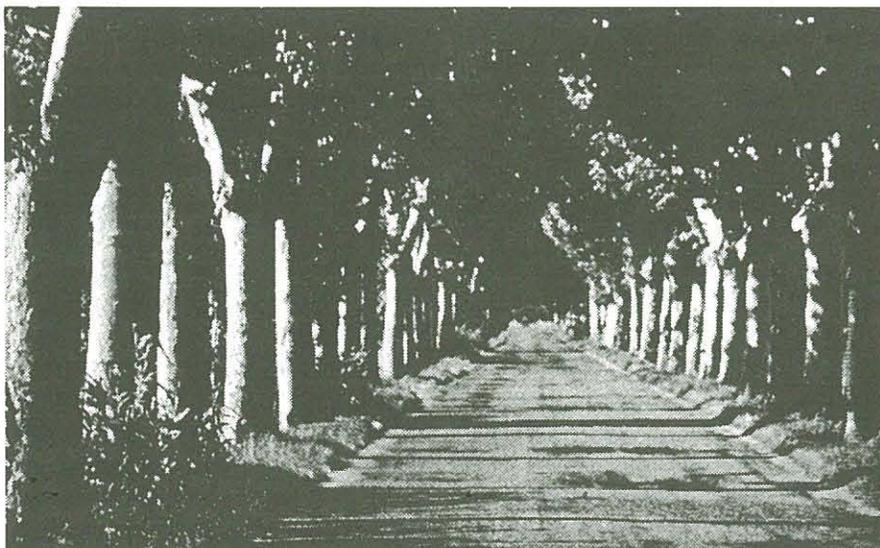
Following the example of their Road and Highway colleagues, all engineers in France are now taking a critical look at the manuals they formerly held as their bibles. Thus E.D.F. (Electricité de France), when launching its nuclear programme, has asked a team of well known architects to "dress-up" its enormous site, and after refusing for years to bury its high tension cables, the Corporation has recognized that the procedure is economically sound and, since 1989, has agreed to bury 3000 km of cable. Besides, in compliance with an agreement made between the Ministry of Equipment (Works) and itself, the E.D.F. is now attempting to "clean up" the surroundings of historical monuments and sensitive areas. It even appointed a small environmental mission in 1989, spending some 3000 million francs, to a meliorate ways of fitting its installations into the surrounding landscape.

A similar effort has been made by the company building the T.G.V. (train à grande vitesse), which no longer cares to be seen as a countryside wrecker. Agronomists have been questioning the after-effects of excessive bulldozing, and consequently hedges are being replanted here and there. As for the industrialists, they are also calling on landscape architects to devise new ways of hiding their galvanize fencing which the eternal rows of poplars have so far hardly managed to conceal. All over France city councillors inspired by the new environmental policy, inaugurated in 1990 in Savoie, are taking a fresh

look around their districts and showing an interest in the skyline.

After more than a century, the much argued topic is still the same: if the environment is the mirror of society, why should anyone intervene to slow down its evolution? And whose prerogative is it to say that the old order was better than the new one? In reply, it can be pointed out that the conservation of the national heritage (our main touristic asset), and the preservation of an ecological balance and of a certain social comfort (by avoiding the traumas of sudden transformations) are indeed very good reasons to intervene. But how far to go in this direction? Robert Poujade used to say that one "can neither be too conservative nor too careless". So, our current objective should be to find the most appropriate way of integrating the beauty of the past with that of modern times.

At present, three overcrowded schools of landscape architecture - in Versailles, Angers and Paris - are annually turning out a crop of 60 graduates. These young professionals are gardening, planting screens for depressed areas and laying out small parks as a minor gesture of beautification. With time it is hoped they will become real planners, actively involved in the design and lay-out of large environs. Only then will the national landscape, constantly subjected to change, reflect the true and deep aspirations of its inhabitants. The French people of today do think that the quality of life has to do with the quality of their surroundings.



Left: A Tree-lined road in Southern France.