

‘Consulting the genius of the plant’: redefining space and place at work in Britain and America at the turn of the 19th century.

The paper examines the role of landscape architecture in redefining external space for social and welfare reform in the workplace at the turn of the 19th century.

The discovery of this photograph of factory women in their garden at the Cadbury Chocolate factory in Bournville near Birmingham in the 1890s was the catalyst for my research on factory gardens – these were gardens made by industrialists for their workers to use during and after the working day and at weekends.¹ At first sight, the young women in the photograph seem to be middle class girls, perhaps in the garden of their boarding school. But instead they are workers from the Cadbury Chocolate Factory in Bournville in their garden adjacent to the factory that was known as The Girls’ Grounds – they are working class factory girls reinvented in the image of middle-class respectability. It is of course a highly contrived and controlled image, taken for promotional purposes to persuade the consumer that the factory environment was safe, healthy and even pleasant and that factory girls were respectable. This photograph raises many questions about class and gender identity and about the relationship between landscape design, social and welfare reform and social control in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This paper will discuss what I have identified as a ‘Factory Garden Movement’ in Britain and the USA from the late 19th century - initiatives by industrialists to provide pleasure gardens and recreation space for factory workers. This paper will examine some of the landscapes of the major case studies - Cadbury and the NCR at the turn of the 19th century - to show how industrialists employed landscape architects to appropriate historical, cultural and metaphorical meanings of gardens and their social value in a bid to redefine industry as modern – as progressive and responsible. Borrowing from theories developed in cultural geography and social science on the organisation of space and place and the power relations that operate within social space, the paper will show that factory gardens and parks were designed for their potential to liberate the workforce from alienating factory work and environments and they were promoted as powerful symbols of ideal conditions in industry. The paper will argue that the value of factory gardens to the workforce was ambiguous. Factory gardens were reforming and progressive in some respects as some workers benefitted from them, but others resented them because their ultimate purpose was to maximise profits.

The initiatives of progressive industrialists like the Cadbury Brothers and John Patterson, President of the NCR to make factory landscapes, were pragmatic developments of ideals in social reform, including from utopianists such as William Morris and Edward Bellamy. Edward Bellamy’s book *Looking Backward* was published in 1888 and William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* in 1890. In both books, the organisation of garden and park space is representative of systems of social organisation. A comparison of the landscape types in these texts emphasises the paradoxical nature of gardens and parks with their connotations of

¹ Photograph from the Cadbury archive, Cadbury, Bournville

both freedom and control. Morris also wrote specifically about factories in his utopian polemic 'A Factory as it Might Be', published in *Justice* magazine in 1884 and based on his progressive workshop at Merton Abbey.² In the article, he recommended that industrialists should provide gardens at their factories for worker recreation and refreshment during the working day. The Cadburys and Mr Patterson did just this. They employed leading landscape designers to create gardens at their factories to maximise the amenity and aesthetic of their factories - modern industrial landscapes that harmonised industry, the machine and nature and gave opportunities for different activities.

The Cadbury Girls' Grounds, of 12 acres were designed by Cheals of Crawley, a prominent firm of garden architects who had designed several public parks in England and Wales. The grounds, across the road from the factory, were designed as a gendered space. Except for public events, men were not allowed. They were constructed from the grounds of Bournbrook Hall which dated from the mid 18th century, a property bought by the Cadburys in 1895. In 1907 the Palladian villa which was surplus to requirements, was demolished and Cheals used the hole where cellars of the house had been to construct a lily pond. The Grounds also had tennis courts, a pergola for decorative effect, and for theatrical performances, an amphitheatre, lawns for lounging, dancing and events like fetes and pageants, and a fully functioning kitchen garden that supplied flowers and fruit to the factory. The designers maximised the status of a historic landscape garden and they constructed a variety of attractive spaces on different levels with steps and terraces using a variety of materials providing space for a number of functions.³

The NCR grounds were designed by the most prominent landscapists of their day in the USA, the Olmsted Brothers, whose father, Frederick Law Olmsted had designed Central Park in New York. The Olmsted Brothers transformed the factory surroundings using landscaping and planting from ad hoc, disorganised space, to green, orderly and attractive space. They were also asked to design the Boys' Garden which was essentially a large vegetable garden where local boys were encouraged to take a plot and learn how to grow vegetables for their family, or for sale. You can see that it was no ordinary vegetable garden, but a highly structured, and aesthetically pleasing garden, much like the formal vegetable gardens or potagers of French Renaissance chateaux. Therefore, this too was a high-status garden, designed not only for the benefit of the boys, but also to provide an impressive setting for the neighbouring factory. The design also suggests high levels of structured activity and self discipline. Essentially, these boys, most of whom were sons of workers, were being trained up as future NCR employees.

The Cadbury's Girls' Grounds and the NCR Boys' Garden were designed for their potential to improve the character and health of the workforce and to shape the workforce into more

² Morris, W. *A Factory as it Might Be* (Nottingham, 1995) (First published in *Justice* April/May 1894)

³ See the Cheal's plans in the Cadbury archive, Bournville: Cadbury Engineers' Office Drawing of Girls' Grounds (1911). Cadbury drawing no: 3574EAT ; J. Cheal & Sons, Garden Architects 'Cadbury Brothers Ltd, Bournville, alterations to Girls' Recreation Ground' – series of drawings, March – April 1910. Cheals Job No. 32. Cadbury drawing nos. 3233-8; Cheals of Crawley (Garden Architects) Plan. 'Cadbury Bros Bournville Girls' Recreation Ground Plan and Details of Proposed Alterations to Stables etc., no date

efficient and loyal employees. The Cadburys and John Patterson were not utopianists, but reforming industrialists looking to improve the lives of their workforce and to maximise profits. Their landscapes were based on theories prominent in the 19th century that designed space and plenty of exercise had the potential to induce modes of feeling or behaviour,⁴ theories that more recently has been supported by empirical research, particularly in sociology that concludes that gardens and public landscapes are beneficial on many levels from positive economic impacts, to sustainability to health.⁵

But the value of these landscapes was much more than just providing healthy space, it was about creating high status symbolic spaces – a sense of place and a sense of belonging. Cultural geographers have pioneered studies of the interrelations between humans and the designed landscape.⁶ By reading landscape as texts, they have drawn out the symbolic and ideological aspects of landscape – how space is organised according to changing ideas and human social and cultural relations and how landscape and the memory or nostalgia for landscape has the ability to move us or even to redeem us.⁷ By employing landscape architects, the Cadburys and John Patterson created a strong sense of place, a high status community space with high moral and respectable family values. As Edward Relf has argued, ‘An authentic sense of place is above all that of being inside and belonging to (your) place both as an individual and as a member of the community and to know this without reflecting upon it.’⁸

The patrons and designers of factory landscapes looked to historical precedent – a historical place based on a common understanding of an authentic, high status place, all the attributes of a respectable community that would be understood by all. In making their estates, they were place-making, creating their factories in the image of a country estate to express their ownership of the environment, and by association, of their workforce and to give their workforce a sense of self-worth and loyalty. These gardens were historicist, and not innovative in their designs, but they were modern in that they represented a compatibility between the machine and nature and how the two could work together for social progress. They were also modern in the ways that the gardens were exploited for promotional purposes for garden images were used as key components of corporate identity and public relations strategies and they became powerful symbols of ideal and progressive conditions in industry.

The paradox of the factory garden.

A beautiful factory with useful land became an ideal, but despite all attempts to resolve the negative connotations of industry through landscaping, the paradox of the garden with its

⁴ Ruskin frequently wrote about the value of gardens and he was particularly seduced by the idea of the Virgin Mary in her Hortus Conclusus. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1866) he suggested that women thrive in the enclosed world of the garden, while men are more suited to public life.

⁵ Bhatti, M. et al “‘I love being in the garden.’ Enchanting Encounters in Everyday Life’ *Social and Cultural Geography* 10:1 (2009), 61-76

⁶ See Cosgrove, D. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London, 1984); Cosgrove, D. and Daniels, S. (eds.) *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge, 1988); Harvey D. *Spaces of Hope* (Los Angeles, London, 2000); Wilson and Groth, *Everyday America*

⁷ See Harwood, E., Williamson, T., Leslie, M. and Dixon-Hunt, J. ‘Whither Garden History?’ *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 27:2 (April-June 2007), 91-112 and Corner, J. (ed.) *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York, 1999)

⁸ Relf, E. ‘Place and Placelessness’ (London, 1976) p. 65 in Muir *Approaches to Landscape* (London, 1999), p. 277

mixed messages, a space both liberating and controlling, emphasises the difficulties of presenting gardens as ‘an ideal’ in social and welfare reform.

It is tempting to take a Foucaultian approach to the power relations represented in the design and use of these gardens which would suggest that they were a landscape version of the Panopticon, where the workers were under constant surveillance, and where ‘hidden’, non-coercive impositions of power were ‘dressed up’ as social norms, that render the workforce accepting of power and susceptible to its effects?⁹ Foucault’s theories can help to explain how the ideologies of factory gardens and recreation grounds were ‘sold’ to the workforce and to the public, and were largely accepted as positive. But the power relations and structures found in the use and management of the gardens and recreation grounds are much more complex than Foucault’s theories would suggest, because they do not explain any resistances to the industrial space or how and why some workers gained power through the ways that these spaces were managed and used, or resisted power by not using them at all.

Theories by social scientists such as Henri Lebevre and Stephen Lukes have elucidated these more ambiguous power relations in the gardens. Research into the reception of the factory gardens by the workforce, what they felt about them and how they used them, has revealed that some workers resisted corporate power structures in the gardens. They resented the gardens for their representation of insidious corporate power, their disingenuousness, their veneer of respectability, and in some cases, for replacing fair wages. Other employees accepted the value of landscapes to company profits and welcomed the gardens and recreation grounds for their contributions to a better quality of life at work. Some gained power and status and enjoyment through managing sports clubs and other societies, and others benefited from the availability of allotments and gardening advice, a space for rest and fresh air, or even a space to protest.

Conclusion

The making of gardens around or near office and factory buildings, designed by professionals, was driven by belief in the value of gardens and parks to employee recruitment, health, motivation and retention, and to advertising, corporate identity and public relations. The industrialists and their landscape architects exploited the potential of nature to create an unprecedented artistic vision – the factory arcadia. While neither these landscapes, nor those that were created through the 1920s and 1930s, were ‘modernist’ stylistically, they conformed to the technological and social objectives of modernist design utopias that placed the machine in the forefront of social progress. A beautiful factory with useful land became part of a modern industrial outlook, but the paradox of a factory garden, a site of both social progress and of social control, where the power relations are ambiguous, emphasises the difficulties of presenting landscape design as an agent in social reform.

⁹ See Lukes, S. *Power. A Radical View* 2nd revised edn. (Basingstoke, 2005), p. 91