

Introduction

Carl Theodor Sørensen is one of the great landscape architects of the twentieth century. His work is at once monumental and modest, artful and humane, refined and original, serious and playful, restrained yet free.

Sørensen's career spanned the rise and evolution of Modernism in the twentieth century. He worked with virtually all the leading architects of Danish functionalism. He shared their belief that architecture is both a spatial and social art. Unlike many Modernists, however, Sørensen studied garden history, and a playful interpretation of the motifs of garden art was integral to his work.

Sørensen's body of work is enormous – more than two thousand projects – and encompasses a remarkable range – from small gardens to large institutions and new residential developments. Among these are monuments of landscape architecture and of modern design. Sørensen's work still seems fresh. It anticipated current explorations and investigated ideas and forms not yet fully explored. And it addressed issues of great concern today.

How can we build landscapes that express the special conditions of a particular time and place? How can we design landscapes that invite the creative participation of the people who use them and that still retain an artistic integrity? What is the relationship between landscape art and the arts of painting and sculpture? What are the special characteristics of landscape as an artistic medium, and how can these be exploited? How can an understanding of the history of garden design contribute to contemporary landscape architecture? Sørensen was concerned with all these issues; the same man who defined his work as garden art was also the inventor of the adventure playground. His ability to fuse art, function, and tradition belie the polarizations that plagued the profession in the decades after his death. Therein lies Sørensen's greatness and his significance for landscape architecture today.

The International Context

Sørensen began his career as a landscape architect during the second decade of the century, the period when Edward Lutyens (1869-1944) and Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) accomplished some of their finest work in England, and when Beatrix Ferrand (1872-1959), Warren Manning (1860-1938), and Jens Jensen (1860-1951) produced great gardens and parks in the United States. Some of Sørensen's finest early work (Kampmann) shows the influence of Lutyens and Jekyll.

Sørensen (1893-1979), Thomas Church (1902-1978) of the United States, Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900-1996) of England, and Luis Barragan (1902-1991) of Mexico stand out as giants among the first generation of Modernists in landscape design. Their best works are monuments of Modernism. Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940), Sigurd Lewerentz (1885-1975) and Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) also contributed great works of landscape design (Forest Cemetery and Taliesin West, respectively), but these were singular projects within predominantly architectural practices.

Sørensen's work was to Denmark what Luis Barragan's work was to Mexico and Tommy Church's work was to California. Church and Sørensen, in particular, shared many characteristics. Both men designed humble suburban gardens, as well as large estates for wealthy clients. Both delighted in the exploration of formal geometry; both shared a respect for function. Church's book, *Gardens Are For People* (1956) was well-known in Denmark, and may have inspired Sørensen's *39 Haveplaner. Typiske haver til et typehus* (1966). The geometry of Donnell Garden (1948), one of Church's masterworks, invites comparison with the allotment gardens in Nærum (1948) and Sonja Poll's garden (1970).

Sørensen retired from his professorship at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, during the period in which Lawrence Halprin was designing freeways, public plazas, and residential projects, in which Ian McHarg introduced ecological planning and design to the landscape architecture curriculum at the University of Pennsylvania. The end of Sørensen's career in the 1970s, coincided with the rise of Post-Modernism. Sørensen died in 1979, the year that the Etablissement public du parc de La Villette was created to supervise the planning and construction of the park that later became one of the landmarks of Post-Modern landscape design.

Place

The work of C.Th. Sørensen is fundamentally Danish in form and spirit. The recurrent motifs in Sørensen's work are the common elements of the Danish cultural landscape: the woodland edge, the open field, the hedge, the grove. The winding woodland edge of Vitus Berings Park with the open lawn at its center is a microcosm of the Danish landscape, as are the lawn and groves of oak at Århus University and Højstrupparken. The hedges that form the boundary of Århus University, the hedges of the allotment gardens in Nærum that enclose fruit trees, gardens, and bungalows, the elliptical hedge of Sonja Poll's garden echo the hedges that enclose Danish farmhouses and farmyards.

People

Sørensen's works are profoundly humane. They are comfortable. The needs of people are not neglected for the ends of art. Often what first appears as a rigid geometric structure is actually quite flexible in its use (Kampmann, Kalundborg, Nærum). Even his most monumental projects, such as Kongenshus Mindepark, do not dwarf the human, but keep the human at the center.

The places Sørensen created are enlivened by the people who use them. He frequently crafted an artful framework that he intended the users to employ and transform; this is part of the strength of the allotment gardens in Nærum (1948), for example. In this sense, Sørensen anticipated performance art and the public projects of Lawrence Halprin, such as the Portland Fountains of the 1960s.

When Sørensen retired from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, a new wave of concerns was sweeping over the School and society. The new generation rejected formal art and the traditions of garden design and focussed upon social function and

politics. This Sørensen could not comprehend. Although a formalist, he had never abandoned a concern for people and for larger social issues. This is especially important to remember now, in a period when gardens are once again being regarded as an art form. Today, many landscape artists forget that gardens are a social, as well as a spatial, art.

Landscape as Art

C.Th. Sørensen insisted that gardens are an art form. He wrote a manifesto outlining this conviction: *The Origin of Garden Art* (1963). He was intensely interested in modern painting and sculpture, as were many contemporary landscape designers, such as Andre Vera in France and Geoffrey Jellicoe in England. While Vera translated the vocabulary of Cubism into garden design, and Jellicoe the surrealists, Sørensen was especially intrigued by Futurism and Constructivism. These movements were influential on Sørensen's development as a landscape architect who saw his work as a form of art. Landscape, as a dynamic medium, was well-suited to exploration of the themes of these artistic movements. Sørensen translated them into landscape design in the spirals and ovals at Vitus Berings Park and the allotment gardens in Nærum.

Landscape as a Medium

Sørensen was well grounded in the medium of his profession. His early training and experience as a gardener provided a foundation for continued observation and experimentation, particularly with plants. He used plants selectively – often massing a single or several species – and inventively (such as his use of Laburnum at Middelfart Byggecentrum). Many of his designs required an attentive gardener and unorthodox gardening techniques. At times, this put him at odds with municipal gardeners.

Historic Precedent

Sørensen had a broad, deep knowledge of garden history, but he studied gardens from the perspective of a maker of gardens rather than a scholar. He drew from this knowledge and used it freely. Sørensen did not quote from the past, he transformed historical elements rather than applying them unaltered. He brought traditional garden elements into new relationships with one another. Sørensen used these motifs in forms that were unmistakably modern, yet connected to the traditions of Danish garden art from Liselund to Mariebjerg Cemetery.

Written Work

Of all twentieth century landscape architects, C.Th. Sørensen may be the most prolific author. If Sørensen had written in English, he would be well-known for his writings alone. He wrote eight books, edited two volumes, and published hundreds of articles. Of these, one short book was translated into English and another into German and Dutch.

The subjects of these publications are wide-ranging: the role of open space in urban life and town planning (*Parkpolitik i Sogn og Købstad*, 1931); horticulture (*Buske og Træer* and *Frilandsblomster* 1948-49); the history of garden art (*Europas Havekunst*, 1959); principles of garden design (*Om Haver*, 1939, and *39 Haveplaner. Typiske haver til et typehus*, 1966); education (*Vejledning i Fagtegning for Unge Gartnere*, 1927 and 1934); and autobiography (*Haver. Tanker og arbejder*, 1975).

Despite his built and published work, C.Th. Sørensen is not well known outside Scandinavia and even within Denmark outside of the design professions. Apart from a brief mention in such books as Shephard's *Modern Gardens* (1953) and Elizabeth Kassler's *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (1964), and, since the original publication of this introduction in 1993, an article by Peter Bosselmann in *Landscape Journal*, virtually nothing is written about Sørensen in English. How could one of the great masters of twentieth century landscape architecture escape international recognition?

None of Sørensen's works were built outside Denmark, and they were rarely published outside Scandinavia. The absence of work outside Denmark, however, is only part of the answer to Sørensen's relative invisibility. Even in Denmark, many architectural histories make slight mention of his work and his contributions to important architectural projects such as Århus University.

Sørensen's relative lack of recognition is part of a larger problem relating to landscape architecture and to the history of Modernism. Most people, including architects and architectural historians, have little understanding of the scope of landscape architecture and little knowledge of its history. A few years after Sørensen's death, for example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York sponsored a conference on landscape design in the twentieth century. Landscape architects listened with amazement as architects and architectural historians pondered such questions as why there was no modern movement in landscape architecture. Why and how could they have overlooked Church, Jellicoe, Tunnard, Halprin, and Kiley, not to mention C.Th. Sørensen?

The fundamental flaws of the conference (and the book published later) lay in the misconceptions of the organizers "that this century had witnessed the fundamental demise of the park and garden; and . . . that, generally, a vital, modern landscape tradition never emerged." The organizers also felt "that the aesthetics of the twentieth century, particularly in the visual arts, were fundamentally hostile to nature." To anyone familiar with the work of C.Th. Sørensen, not to mention the works and writings of many other twentieth-century landscape architects, these statements are unbelievable. Fortunately, recent books on Modernism and Landscape Architecture have brought attention to these works. This book presents the life and work of C.Th. Sørensen to an international audience for the first time.

Anne Whiston Spirn